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SPEARHEAD

Novel based on two English commando raids, one on Norway, the other on France. A nineteen year old Irish lad, Emmet O'Donovan is the hero. Carol Blanchard, sister of O'Donovan's captain is the heroine.

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A Novel by

JOHN BROPHY



Publishers

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New York and London



SPEARHEAD

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SPEARHEAD

CHAPTER 1

Masculine Society

SPRING came late in this northern county, and at twelve minutes to nine on a morning in March daybreak was scarcely complete. Rainclouds screened and darkened the visible world, only here and there rifted by a pallid diffusion of light. The sky seemed to sag low across the narrow valley and the long intermingling slopes and buttresses of the foothills. Further away, where the high fells shouldered upward, devoid of trees, intersected by straggling walls built of unshaped grey stones, the clouds merged into coursing mountain mist which sliced off peaks and crests, and, paler, smoke-like, came spreading and wavering down the passes. The wind blew wet and gusty and cold. Rain had fallen all night and the short grass and the turf was soggy underfoot.

Two cars, camouflaged in patternings of dull green and tawny paint which, more readily than number plates and formation symbols, indicated their military status, moved swiftly along the largest of the valleys and then forked to the right up a rougher road till they stopped on a hill crest. Eight passengers emerged and stood by the roadside, carefully avoiding the muddy puddles. Only one was a civilian, a broad-shouldered oldish man, in a dark overcoat, who wore rubber wellington boots to protect his feet. He turned up the collar of his coat till it touched the brim of his soft felt hat and then, hands in pockets, moved a few yards away, stamping his feet and looking around with some curiosity, although there was nothing in sight except the mist-shrouded hills, the drivers sitting at the wheels of the cars, and the seven officers who were talking earnestly together in a small group. One belonged to the Navy: he had a white silk

muffler at his throat, vivid against the blue cloth of his uniform and the gold leaf thickly encrusted on the peak of his cap. Another was an airman, very tall and elegant in paler blue. The remaining five were Army officers, with scarlet cloth encircling their caps and tabbed on the lapels of their greatcoats. They all wore riding-boots of highly polished brown leather. The three staff officers held back politely from the centre of the group where the two generals conferred.

"If the map reference is right," said one general, "we're here."

"The map reference is correct enough. Pin-pointed. The question is—where the devil have these chaps got to?"

The lieutenant-general stared round under the peak of his cap at the desolate landscape. "No cover for miles," he observed. "Except that valley. Better have a look-see."

The other general turned to his staff officer and with a nod indicated that he should investigate where, two hundred yards off the road, the turf sloped up to a natural rampart and then fell away into a narrow valley, the far side of which was just discernible in the cloud-darkened morning light. But at this moment the civilian in the rubber boots took one hand from his pocket and pointed.

"Here comes someone."

The head and shoulders of a man wearing a steel helmet with a netting cover could now be seen rising above the bare turf, apparently straight out of the valley, and presently, as he approached with a swift, long-legged stride, almost a series of leaps, he was recognizable as an officer in battledress, wearing a respirator on his chest and khaki webbing equipment. The civilian noticed that he carried a holstered revolver strapped to his right thigh. He came up swiftly, a tall young man, elegant in spite of his utilitarian uniform, fresh-faced, with regular features not less handsome for the high-bridged jut of the nose and the long fair moustaches swept right and left above the mouth.

Three yards short of the group on the roadside he halted, clicking his right heel smartly against the left despite the uneven foothold. With his whole slender body momentarily tense, he

saluted. At one glance he distinguished the lieutenant-general from the major-general, and addressed himself to the senior.

"Captain Blanchard, sir, representing the C.O. and in charge of the training demonstration. As you know, sir, the rest of the unit has gone south to take part in a Command exercise."

"You're late," said the lieutenant-general, testily.

"My instructions, sir, were to meet you here at 08.55 hours." The young officer glanced at his watch, the quick upward flick of his hand and the bending of his elbow carelessly graceful. "It still wants eight minutes to nine. But I'm sorry if you have been kept waiting, sir."

"When you've been as long in the Service as I have, Captain Blanchard, you'll learn to be more than three minutes ahead of time. Not a soul to be seen when we drove up."

"The men are just over there, sir. Under the ridge. They keep out of sight because concealment is part of their training."

The civilian had been watching this encounter intently. Only the alert eyes in his lined face betrayed his appreciation of the captain's refusal to be intimidated by high rank and an overbearing manner. The gleam disappeared from his eyes, however, when the senior general, having mentioned each of his companions by name as a formal introduction (the captain standing stiffly to attention throughout), said: "Well, lead on. The sooner we start the better."

The civilian intervened then. In a level voice he remarked: "One moment, please. Captain Blanchard may very well wonder what I am doing here." To the young officer he added: "My name is Brind—Alexander Brind. I'm a journalist."

He had looked for some private response in Blanchard's manner, the flicker of an eyelid, an unspoken acknowledgment of kinship between those who must suffer as best they may the caprices of high authority, but he received only a slight bow, a hostile glance. I might have known it, he thought, as he followed the others across the turf. At my age I ought to have known it. This boy is a professional soldier. He's ready enough to stand up to a brass-hat, within the limits of King's Regulations, because he's sure of himself, because he has the sort of social and economic foundations which make for self-confidence. But when

a civilian butts in, and raps a general over the knuckles for discourtesy, the whole damned army forms square to defend itself. Professional solidarity!

Brind caught up with the others as they reached the bank of turf overlooking the valley. The light was improving, but the wind blew rougher and colder here where they stood exposed a hundred feet higher than on the roadside. The wind was too damp to tauten the skin on the face, but its cold buffets pressed the flesh achingly against the bones, and Brind guessed that on the high peaks around, the only authentic mountains in England, hidden at present in cloudmist, winter snows were still drifted hard and icy, streaking with white the green slate and the grey and brown of the granite crags. His shoulders, his neck and his ribs, despite the woolen waistcoat he wore and the thick substance of his overcoat, creaked with rheumatic pains whenever he moved, and round his eyes the nerves began to pulsate, hot and sharp, uncontrollable. Normally he rarely thought of his age—he would be sixty-one in June—and the unformulated assumption behind his manner was that he was still not too far on the mature side of youth, still at an age when experience had not overlaid the expectation of romance, adventure, athletic exploits, and all the other vain delectations of body and spirit which men doubtless ought to put behind them more willingly than they do. This March wind was a reminder of reality, blustering down from the passes of this northern wilderness to rack him with petty neuralgic maladies.

But he had not come here to think about himself. He had come to observe, and afterwards to record, for the information of the British public, what younger men were doing to prepare for the future, for that large but still unspecified counter-attack by the armed forces of democracy against the spread-out tyranny of Nazism in Europe. He looked right and left before he saw, far away at the southern end of the foothill where he stood, a group of soldiers, strung out in line, a few yards below the crest. He counted thirty in all, some sitting, some standing, a few talking quietly. He focused his field-glasses on them. The definition was poor, but he could pick out rifles, longer weapons with funnel-shaped muzzles which he recognized as Bren guns,

and short weapons held, pointing downwards, as a gamekeeper holds a shot-gun, under the right arm. Those would be sub-machine guns.

The soldiers' faces were dark, and at first he thought they had been blackened with soot or burnt cork, as he had blackened his own, twenty years earlier, for trench-raids in France. Then he saw that the darkness was natural: the brown patina on the skin which comes from constant exposure to all kinds of weather. Yet the glasses showed him that these were young men, none short and few exceptionally tall, but all vigorous and muscular, even in repose. At such a distance it was possible to detect a predominant type among them, and he defined it in his mind as a broad-shouldered body with only slightly narrower waist and hips, and a face handsome without subtlety, rather square of feature, set sturdily on a sturdy neck. They carried themselves well. They were virile. To women they would be extremely attractive. It was not improbable that most of them knew it. But here there was not a woman to be seen for miles around. The bleak countryside belonged exclusively to this small masculine society of soldiers.

Suddenly it occurred to Alexander Brind that there was an incongruity in what he was viewing. He lowered his glasses and then walked over to the group of officers.

"I take it these are the men who are going to give the demonstration?"

Captain Blanchard nodded.

"They're not hand-picked for this show, if that's what you want to know. Just one of our sub-units. It's their turn to do the assault to-day."

"They're not wearing greatcoats. That's what I noticed. Nor are you. Is that part of the training?"

"We hardly ever wear greatcoats," he said. "We have leather jerkins, but unless it's well below freezing-point we leave them off too. When you're thoroughly fit you don't notice the cold so much. Some more than others, of course."

"What's the name of this corps?" he asked.

"We call our units Commandos."

Blanchard probably had no idea where the word came from.

He was too young to remember the South African War at the end of Victoria's reign. Boer commandos, roving bands of horse-men, had given Buller and Roberts and Kitchener a devil of a lot of trouble before the revolt of the Dutch colonists against British imperialism was crushed. Then a few years later that imperialism itself was overthrown by the British conscience. The Boers were given self-government and a decade later fought side by side with the British against Kaiser Wilhelm's Prussians. And now, forty years afterwards, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, the British took the name—and the idea—from their former enemies and applied it to their own troops training to avenge Dunkirk, to be the first spearheads thrust into the side of Hitler's Nazi Empire. There was a lot of British history, significant self-cancelling history, packed into that single word, Commando.

"Have these men come far?" Brind asked.

"They've marched six miles," said Captain Blanchard. "They slept out last night, in tents. And they haven't eaten since midday yesterday. This is to show what they can do in difficult conditions."

"What about you?"

"I was with them."

"And nothing to eat either?"

Blanchard laughed. "Not a bite! But I'm feeling fine. Also I'm going to stay up here in comfort and watch the show with you. You'll see what I mean by that in a minute."

This young captain was a good chap, for all his Mayfair snootiness!

The porridge and bacon and sausage he had had for breakfast at the hotel suddenly felt queasy in Brind's stomach. In the last war, as an infantry officer, he had been cold and wet often enough, and gone hungry for long periods. But not in training! Not at home in 1914-18 England which, by comparison with these heavily rationed days, now seemed sleek and over-fed! If the men waiting farther along the hillside were the picked troops, the *corps d'élite* of the new British Army slowly expanding and re-arming after the disastrous evacuation from France

and Belgium, they certainly had to pay a stiff price for the privilege.

The long low hill turned away to the west, about a hundred yards from where the group of observers waited. Where the hill turned away, the narrow, steep-sided valley turned with it. The stream flowing along the bottom of the valley, twenty yards wide, was swollen and dark except where a race tossed the surface into white foam or the torrent glissaded transparently over boulders strewn across the narrow bed. Just short of this bend in valley, high on the nearer hillside, a ghyll emerged from the turf and the bracken and tumbled in a triple rope of booming white water down a short cliff face. At the foot of the fall a thin tributary could be traced, winding to join the stream, but rushes and tussocks of taller grass, still sere with winter yellow, revealed that the level ground there made a small quagmire.

On the far side of the valley another long-shouldered hill rose at a much sharper angle, devoid of trees and with a wall of loose stones, running parallel with the crest, halfway up the slope. Opposite where the stream widened into a pool, still on the left of the observers, the wall ran at a right angle up to the hill crest. Through field-glasses Brind could see, between the stone wall and the stream, irregular belts of barbed wire supported by iron posts, a ditch filled with the expanded continuous hoops known as concertina wire, and a wooden framework, about fifteen feet high, which also was festooned with barbed strands. He had no doubt there were even more formidable obstacles not to be discovered till men toiling along the valley were delayed by them. The country was difficult enough to traverse without these obstacles, and it had little of the formal layout customary in a military training ground. The artificial snares and stops it held for soldiers were merged into the bleak landscape, except that, high on the side of the hill opposite, he could just discern, leaning against rocks here and there, small piles of sandbags and three wooden targets, painted grey and shaped to represent kneeling soldiers with close-fitting German helmets. The greater part of each of these wooden or sandbagged figures was concealed from view by rocks, bushes or an upward curve of the ground in front. The commando men moved quietly away,

farther to the left, then back over the brow of the hill and out of sight.

"The first part of the demonstration," Captain Blanchard explained, "is an assault on an enemy position. There it is, across the valley. Those sandbags and wooden targets near the top of the hill, almost directly opposite us, represent enemy machine posts, dug in. The attack, therefore, has to be on a transverse or diagonal line, down from this hill and up the other, but also along the valley to the north. Both sides will be using live ammunition."

Alexander Brind cocked an enquiring eye at him.

The captain added to his explanation: "There are no men up by those targets, on which the attack will fire. Instead we have three Bren guns posted on this side of the valley, among those trees beyond that little marsh. They will fire across the front of the attackers and, later on, over their heads."

"The two lines of fire," Captain Blanchard went on, "will intersect, like a St. Andrew's Cross. We can't very well get nearer to realism than that without having casualties. Now you can see the first patrol coming over the hill."

Looking left along the crest, they watched seven commando men slither through a miniature ravine and then shake out into the formation of a V, point forwards, about five yards interval between one man and the next. They moved swiftly, bending forward as they ran. Suddenly from the right, from the woods commanding the length of the valley, there came an abrupt and protracted series of explosive sounds, rattling and reverberating, and tiny balls of incandescence began to stream in front of the watchers, rapid shuttles sliding on a faintly curved trajectory, golden, rosy and opalescent by turns in the dim morning light, so fast that the startled eye, unable to follow one, caught only the continuity of motion, while the eardrums still reverberated. It's a devil of a lot of noise for machine-guns to make, thought Brind, and then realized that the narrow valley trapped and enlarged all sounds so that the noise of the breech explosions was echoed from one hillside to another. Almost at once counter-fire opened loudly on the left and, looking that way, they saw that the men of the patrol had flattened themselves into the ground,

taking cover behind mole-hills and tufts of longer grass. They had a Bren gun of their own in action, and the transient glitterings began to move the other way as well, so that diagonal intersections of phosphorescent light could be traced in the air above the valley.

Blanchard spoke again.

"The patrol has located the enemy and is firing on his position to make him keep his head down. The less he sees, the better. They are firing single aimed shots from the Bren and the rifles. Normally we use tracer ammunition at night, but we mixed some in for this show to make things clearer."

The patrol was well on its targets, too. Down there they would have little to aim at, but, using his glasses from the hill crest, Brind could see little spirts of dust rising from the propped-up sandbags on the far hillside, and the wooden targets were shaking and shuddering as the bullets pierced them.

"The commander is going to hold the enemy in front," said Blanchard, "while he sends a party out to his left flank to make a close assault. They'll use this hill we're standing on for cover till they get down in the valley and can move in shelter of the stone wall half-way up the opposite hill. Now he's got his mortar team in action."

A couple of men had crawled forward, wide of the patrol, and installed a three-inch mortar behind a hillock. Brind could see them adjusting the angle of the short tubular barrel. Then one lifted a cylindrical shell and slid it into the muzzle.

A second later the shell was rocketing high into the sky: higher, higher. They craned their necks to watch it. It went so high that the rainclouds hid it for a moment or two. Then it fell almost vertically, with gathering velocity, and exploded on the far hillside, well beyond the targets. The mortar men adjusted the angle of elevation, and thereafter the shells towered up and fell in rapid and accurate succession, driving into the earth and sending up small fountains of turf and rock fragments.

Meanwhile, on the left, at the southern end of the valley, two parties had forded the stream and were moving, bent low as they ran, along the near side of the stone wall. Three men,

detached, climbed rapidly up the hill slope, well behind the other two parties.

"That's a small flank guard for the flank attack," said Blanchard. "Later on, we'll see what they're after."

All these men were so far away that, foreshortened by distance, they seemed like agitated but purposeful puppets in khaki, and the mind had to make its own calculations to realize how swiftly they traversed the difficult ground, the three men moving uphill almost as easily as the two larger parties advancing in shelter of the wall. While the mortar shells steepled up above and in front of them, and the patrol on their right exchanged diagonal fire at intervals across the valley with the Bren guns in the woods, these two parties presently halted, the first man still some ten yards short of the place where the wall turned sharply away to ascend the hillside. The three climbers, the extreme flank guard beyond them, reached the top of the hill and disappeared.

Through the field-glasses Brind could see that the first two men of the forward wall party were working vigorously with their hands as they squatted, removing stones from the wall, making a hole and enlarging it till it was big enough to crawl through.

Blanchard explained the situation. "They suspect the enemy may have pushed forward an outpost at the angle of the wall. The three men who went over the top of the hill—you saw they kept in cover—are now working round to the far end and the far side of the wall. There they go. You can hear their rifles if you can't see 'em. They're enfilading that wall from the top of the hill. You can see the bullets hitting there. Look at the turf by the angle of the wall. See the hole those men have just made? They're crawling through now. Now they're advancing up the hill, with the wall between them and the main enemy post."

It seemed that they climbed slowly, but Brind knew that only young strong men with powerful lungs and muscles could make such a pace up that long steep hillside.

"Now," said Blanchard, "the three men at the top of the hill have found a new target. They're firing on the main enemy position. Plus the patrol down here close to us. Plus the mortar team. The main attack in two parties is getting in as near as it

can for the close assault. The Bren guns in the woods, representing the enemy, are firing just over their heads now. Watch the tracers, five yards over their helmets. No, lower than that."

With the machine-gun fire hissing and glittering overhead, and the mortar shells exploding just in front, the remote khaki puppets, having left the wall and dispersed into open formation, at last lay prone, and then sent up a Very light, invisible till it burst high in the air and dropped in a little cloud of smoke cored brilliantly with green light. The Bren guns continued to shoot over their heads but the patrol, the mortar and the flanking party ceased fire. Instantly the far-off, foreshortened attackers sprang to their feet and dashed forward with fixed bayonets to overrun the enemy position.

"Good show," said the lieutenant-general.

But the operation was not yet over. The attackers moved on beyond the targets they had bayoneted, lay prone again, and each man began to dig a small hole for himself. Another Very light, this time scarlet, floated up above them.

"That's the success signal. As soon as the position is captured it has to be consolidated, and then the covering parties move up." Already the patrol and the mortar team were advancing. "They search the ground and mop up snipers on the way. We like to make a thorough job of everything we do."

The captain spoke his last comments a little primly, but the major-general, folding his shooting-stick, nodded approval and offered him a cigarette. Blanchard was a bit of a courtier, after all. A natural-born lord of the earth, able to stand up for himself, but with a proper respect for hierarchies and precedences. He would be just as at home on a Mayfair dance-floor as here in battle-dress on a wet and desolate hillside. All those Commando men, Brind thought suddenly, would have women somewhere who cared about them. Mothers and wives. Though not many of them would be married: too young for that. But sweethearts certainly. No, not sweethearts: the word was out of date. There was a more casual, off-hand name. Girl friends. And plenty of them to choose from.

Blanchard announced that the cars would take the visitors by road to the hill on the far side of the valley, from which

they could watch the second part of the demonstration. He would rejoin them there.

The generals, the naval captain, the air commodore and the staff officers turned away. Brind walked over to Blanchard.

"How are you going across?" he asked.

"Walk."

"What about the stream?"

"There's a place with some stepping-stones. Some of them are under water, but not much."

"Mind if I come with you?"

The captain glanced at the journalist's rubber boots and then said: "O.K. Don't blame me if you fall in."

They set off down a narrow footpath into the valley and crossed the river just above the marsh, which Brind noticed was strewn with coils of barbed wire.

"Just to make the going a bit more difficult," Blanchard explained.

More than half of the stepping-stones were under water, for the stream was in flood, foaming white where it was not free to flow round, and the current made a foothold difficult to obtain and keep. Some of the water slopped over the top of Brind's boots and began to soak and chill his feet. He would be sneezing and blear-eyed before nightfall, whereas these young fellows, a third of his age or little more, would thrive on chills and damp and sweat.

They reached the top of the hill a few minutes before the cars drove up. Blanchard explained that the second part of the demonstration would consist of a section taking the stiff course of obstacles along the valley, first on one side of the stream, then on the other, finishing up by crossing the marsh into the woods. At intervals land mines would be exploded, by remote control, just in front of them, and hand grenades thrown in their path: the men would have a twenty-yard clearance for the land mines, but to escape the grenades they must see them coming through the air and take cover. The whole way the Bren gunners, posted along the hillside where the observers stood, would fire at them, a few yards in front, a few yards to the rear, and just over their heads.

"That means," said Brind, "they'll be moving for half a mile or more across the line of fire. There's no cover down there," he went on, "against flank fire from up here. I hope you don't teach these men to go into action like that."

Blanchard took it very well. He looked surprised, as every damned professional soldier did when a civilian flashed a bit of common sense in front of his nose. But, for the first time, he spoke respectfully.

"You're perfectly right. If you care to question the men afterwards you'll find that every one of them understands that in a situation like this, in action, they would have to silence the guns up here one by one before they could move on. We try to make this training as realistic as possible, but we can't go all the way. The sooner this Commando's allowed to make a real raid the better we'll be pleased. Now they're off."

Down in the valley a party of men began to move, three advancing while the others lay prone aiming ahead of them. First one, then another of the Bren guns opened fire. It was possible to observe not only the flight of the tracer ammunition through the air but occasionally the sparking flashes as bullets struck the wire of the first obstacle. When the machine-gunners shifted their aim, the men in the valley passed that obstacle in successive waves. They crawled under the next. They jumped a ditch. They turned right, and swam the stream—it was narrow and deep there—floating their weapons in front of them. On the far side they had to force a way through a field of loose wire concealed in reeds to get to the pool where the stream widened. This they waded through, holding their weapons above their heads to keep them dry. There were concealed holes in the pool, for twice a man sank suddenly till the water reached his shoulders. Brind, who had seen and taken part in a number of infantry advances from the Somme to the piercing of the Hindenburg line in 1918, knew that these youngsters toiling far below him, soaked in slime and river water and sweat, were moving very fast. Though they rarely ran all out, and regained their formation at the end of every move, they never stopped to rest until, on the far side of the pool, they all lay flat in the muddy grass, not as for firing, but with feet and legs

together, face downward, hands pressing up under the steel helmets to cover their ears. One, two, three seconds passed, while the chattering Bren guns enclosed them in a tight box of incessant bullets. Then the ground in front of them heaved up with an eruptive reverberating explosion.

"The first land mine," said Captain Blanchard.

Before the last clods had pattered down to earth, the commando men were advancing again. Across a ditch, then over the big wooden framework festooned with barbed wire. Still with the pink and yellow tracers glittering in front, behind and overhead, they ploughed half-way across the marsh, and then lay flat in the black mud while another land mine was detonated almost in their faces. They crossed the stream again, back to the near side, most of them wading this time; and here, while they fell into pits lightly concealed by wickerwork covered with huge turfs, and scrambled out again, soldiers on the hillside above began to hurl hand grenades around them, dark little clots spinning high through the air and bursting with a jerk and a stab of crimson flame among the smoke. A little later the men disappeared among the trees. The Bren guns ceased fire. The sudden silence was oppressive for long seconds. Then it was broken by a rattle of firing from the trees, continuous but irregular.

"They put in five rounds rapid," said Blanchard, "at the end of the course. We've got field targets in the woods. They like that. It satisfies them, after being shot at all the way along."

"Good show," the lieutenant-general declared. "Damned good show in fact."

Brind found no opportunity to speak to the commando men, for the senior general was determined that the major-general should not address the troops, and insisted that the whole party should drive back to the town immediately. If he missed his place in the car, Brind realized, he would probably miss the train back to London. He had a monopoly of this story for, so far as he knew, no other journalist had seen commando men in training; but he must hurry back to Fleet Street and push his typescript personally past the censorship.

He was sorry. All he had seen was puppets in khaki at a

distance having a tough time. He was still curious to learn what manner of men these were, but he had to be content with a glimpse, before the car drove off, of half a dozen young men, smeared with mud from head to foot, climbing up the hillside. One of them had blood on his face, and another had cut his hand and wrist. A small sergeant with bright blue eyes was calling for the first-aid orderlies.

If they were hungry they did not look it. They were all laughing, all except one, a tall boy who, with his steel helmet pushed back on his head, showed a crop of black hair matted with sweat and wisped across his forehead. He was staring at the stocky soldier who held up a bleeding hand.

"What's the matter with you?" the sergeant demanded, in a brusque Scots accent. "What are you staring at?"

Brind knew what the sergeant was thinking: he had the same idea himself. He had often seen rangy, high-strung, idealistic youngsters such as this one sickened and fascinated by their first sight of spilled blood. And when the commando men went into action there would be plenty to be seen worse than a slash from barbed wire.

But the boy smiled. "I was only memorising the colours," he said.

That was a queer thing to say! But the first-aid men came up at that moment, and Alexander Brind had to hurry off to secure his place in the car.

CHAPTER 2

The Billet

ALONG the main street of the little market town, which ran straight and narrow uphill among stone-walled houses with wet slate roofs, a young soldier walked briskly and whistled to himself as he went. He carried the accoutrements of an infantryman with oblivious ease—rifle slung over his right shoulder, haversack, filled ammunition pouches, anti-gas cape, steel helmet, bayonet, entrenching tool, water bottle and, on his chest, at the alert position, the heavy respirator in its squared canvas case. From head to foot he was stained with mud and rain and river water, and his left wrist and hand were tightly bandaged. He swung the arm vigorously to and fro, for all that, the broad fingers grasping a parcel wrapped in white paper. Presently he turned into a side street, and, halting before the door of the seventh house, beat the ornamental iron knocker smartly several times and then waited till the door was opened to him.

"Here we are, ma. Back again, same as I told thee. On the dot."

The soldier was short, thick-set, with short copper-coloured hair: freckles crowded on his forehead and round his eyes. The word "Commando" was lettered in bright-coloured threads at the top of his tunic sleeves. Standing at the open doorway, wiping her hands on a sacking apron, Mrs. Hathersedge gave him a severe scrutiny. Because he was accustomed to that sort of a look from his own mother in Manchester, it neither deceived nor intimidated him.

"You're an hour and a half late, young Bobby Clough. By what you told me I was to expect you by. Table's cleared and

all the dishes washed up. I was just getting ready to go out to the pictures."

"Well, ma, it wasn't our fault. We had a lot of generals come along to see us. Wanting to get a few tips about real fighting. An admiral, too."

"You've always got an excuse ready, Bobby Clough."

"It's true. Look, ma, off you go. Never mind us. I bought some sausages. See? We'll have 'em cooked in next to no time."

"No, lad, the pictures can wait. I'll do your cooking. Where's the rest o' you?"

"Having a beer round the corner. Me, I did the shopping. Too young to go in a pub, I am."

The woman led the way into the kitchen across newly washed floors spread with sheets of old newspapers. The soldier shed his equipment in the hall.

"They didn't ought to drink on an empty stomach. You boys got no sense."

"Empty stomach is right, ma. We're fair clemmed. Not had a bite to eat since we left you yesterday. They even made us turn out our haversacks and pockets, to make sure none of us had brought any sandwiches."

"Is that the truth, Bobby Clough?"

"Now, ma, when have I told thee a lie? It's part of our training, doing without food for twenty-four hours on end."

"And is it part of your training to get yourself all sluched up in mud? I believe you're wet to the skin."

"Nay, I'm not. I dried off nicely on the march back. I've brought some grub, same as I said I would. Three pounds o' sausages. Pork sausages, too."

"Put 'em there. What have you done to your arm, son?"

"Cut it a bit. On the wire. Nothing much. I'm to get a fresh dressing on it to-morrow."

"Well," said Mrs. Hathersedge, "you go upstairs now and get your face and hands clean, anyhow."

She spilled half the sausages into the big frying-pan on the stove, prodded them vigorously with a fork, turned the gas-jet down, and then began to slice some boiled potatoes.

"Bobby!" she called suddenly.

"Yes, ma."

"You're not going upstairs in those boots?"

"Sorry. I nearly forgot."

"Put 'em out in the yard."

"O.K."

From the front door came the loud, cheerful sound of young voices singing the refrain of a popular song, "We're off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz."

For the first time, now that she was alone, Mrs. Hathersedge smiled. Her thin face, in which the features seemed to be formed by the protuberance of the bones under the skin, suddenly glowed with affection. But her voice was still sharp when she called: "I'm no wizard, so you can change your tune. And come here, the lot of you."

Three soldiers, one with the double stripes of a corporal, appeared at the kitchen doorway.

The corporal said "Good morning" in a precise, educated voice which nevertheless retained the thin, flat vowel sounds and slightly rasping consonants of a North countryman. He had straight fair hair, and clear blue eyes, and he was broader of shoulder, thicker of wrist, and with a paler, clearer complexion than the others.

"It's afternoon now, Corporal Gosdaile, as you'd see for yourself if you looked at the clock."

"She won't call me Bill," the corporal complained. "You're a snob, Mrs. Hathersedge. You love ranks and titles. Just because your old man used to be a colour-sergeant in India."

The other two soldiers grinned over his shoulder. They knew better than to enter the kitchen with dirty boots on their feet.

One of them—he had a plain, rather melancholy face set on a long neck—exclaimed: "Sausages! So young Bobby did his stuff?"

"Yes, he did, Mr. Fletcher. And I'm surprised you didn't go shopping with him, instead of supping beer in a public-house."

The landlady always called Private Frank Fletcher "Mister" because he read the Bible night and morning, and had once, by invitation, addressed the congregation at the chapel round the corner. She had not been present but, hearing about it, she had

ever since been impressed. She was convinced that, as soon as the war was over, Fletcher would become a minister of the Gospel, and in her manner towards him her customary maternal reproofs, which she considered suitable for all healthy but bothersome youngmen, were interspersed with an almost reverential respect.

"I haven't been to a public-house," said Fletcher. "I had to see about getting up a team for Saturday. Do you think there's enough sausages there?"

The third soldier wore, under the "Commando" lettering on his shoulder, the word "Canada," grey on khaki, and under that again, "U.S.A." Because of this he was sometimes known as The Walking Atlas, and at other times addressed as "America" or "Flat Races": this last nickname represented the play of wit on his proper name, which was Chester Park. He was a head taller than the others, slenderly built and not all the arms and squad drill of the British Army had been able to take the lounging, slightly undulating and stooping easiness out of his attitudes.

"Frank," he said now, his voice deep, slow, lazily articulated, "your besetting sin is greed. You ought to say a prayer about it."

"I don't want more than my fair share."

"You needn't worry, Mr. Fletcher," the landlady told him. "This is only the first helping I'm frying now. Bobby got three pounds."

Her voice brisked as she added, addressing them collectively: "Now you can take your boots off right away. I don't want my stair carpet muddied up by a lot of clumping dirty boots. Put 'em out in the yard. And then wash yourselves. You can change your clothes afterwards. Go on now. Hitler may be scared of you Commandos, but I'm not."

Bobby Clough, skipping downstairs in canvas shoes, overheard that, and laughed.

"That's right, ma. Tell 'em where they get off. First raid we make, we'll take you along. Won't be long now, I bet. Two false alarms we've had. Third time ought to be lucky. What say, boys? How'd she look going ashore with a frying-pan in one hand and a flat-iron in the other?"

"You're an ungodly lot. All except Mr. Fletcher, of course. I'm sure I don't know how he puts up with you. There you are, Bobby. First come, first served. Get started on that."

The others sat down with only socks on their feet at the kitchen table, and, as Mrs. Hathersedge served each in turn, they began to eat quickly. For a few minutes there was silence. Frank Fletcher was the first to call for another helping from the replenished frying-pan. At that moment there was a knock at the front door.

"I'll do the serving," said Corporal Gosdaile.

Mrs. Hathersedge returned to the kitchen almost at once.

"It's one of your chaps," she announced. "Lost his billet. The son's come home on leave and they can't take him any longer."

The soldier who appeared in the kitchen doorway was almost as thin-faced as Mrs. Hathersedge herself, but so slender, so coltish in his movements, so tentative in the expression hovering and shifting round his eyes and mouth, that he seemed a boy rather than a young man.

"It's O'Donovan," said the American.

"What's the matter?" the corporal asked.

And at the same moment Bobby Clough said: "Come right in, lad."

"I didn't know you chaps were here already." The boy in the doorway spoke apologetically and not very clearly. "Or I'd forgotten. I'll try somewhere else."

Mrs. Hathersedge, rather than the others, who were still hungry, compelled him to stay.

"If I could get another mattress from the town hall," she said, "and the others wouldn't mind moving up a bit, we might manage."

"Ma wants to see the pictures 's afternoon," said Bobby. "O'Donovan can go and ask for a mattress himself, can't you?"

"Yes, of course. That is, if you chaps don't mind me coming here?"

"Sure. Why not? We're all buddies."

Corporal Gosdaile affected to stare at Chester Park admiringly and said: "He not only looks like Gary Cooper, he talks like him."

But none of the three appeared very enthusiastic over this

unexpected addition to the number of men in the billet. The slender boy with black soft hair and long black lashes to his blue eyes seemed to be aware of this.

"Had a good dinner?" Frank Fletcher asked, self-consciously kind.

"Not exactly. In fact, I'd better go right away and see what I can get in a café before it's too late."

"Here, what do you mean?"

"You can't get anything in a café. Not at this time o' day. There's a war on."

"Do you mean to say they didn't give you any dinner, on top of turning you out?"

"Some of these women," observed Mrs. Hathersedge, "they got a swinging stone in their breast instead of a heart."

"It's all right. Not their fault really. The son's home on leave from the Navy. I dare say they'd give me something if I asked, but their dinner was over when I arrived. So I didn't say anything about it."

"I got no meat in the house. And all my coupons gone till Saturday. Looks like bread and cheese for you lad."

"No, it doesn't," said Frank Fletcher. "We can each give up one sausage. That makes four. And some potatoes. Here's mine."

In the end O'Donovan was provided with a meal about half as large as that eaten by the others. They had finished and were drinking strong tea and smoking cigarettes by the time he began to eat his third sausage. Mrs. Hathersedge had taken off her apron, put on hat and coat, and gone to the cinema.

"We'll have a good blow-out to-night," said Frank Fletcher. "Fact is, I'm still hungry. I'll do the shopping. You chaps can cough up now."

"I must pay my share of these sausages," O'Donovan declared. But to that they would not agree.

"This is only to take the edge off our appetite."

"You'd better come into my room," the corporal told O'Donovan. "It's sleep on the floor in this billet, you know. Soon as you've finished you'd better see about that mattress. Bobby and America'll do the washing-up. Yes, you will. That's an order. What do you think I wangled these stripes for?"

CHAPTER 3

Sorts and Sizes

O'DONOVAN and Frank Fletcher went out together, and while the other two privates cleared the table and piled the dirty dishes beside the sink, Corporal Gosdaile sat in the wooden armchair, smoking and resting his body, and, what did not come so easily to him, thinking about immaterial things. He was twenty-seven, the son of a bank manager in Newcastle-on-Tyne. Enlisting at the outbreak of the war, he was kept on home service, and joined the Commandos from the Northumberland Fusiliers when the first call for volunteers was made, after the evacuation from Dunkirk. He had a degree in economics, a bare pass, obtained at a northern university by hard if intermittent study; when the war was over he expected to return to a comfortable post in the office of a shipping firm which controlled a number of coastal steamers. He had made a lot of friends in the civilian years when he was a boy, a youth and a young man with a sports car and a little notebook in which he kept the telephone numbers of girls classified according to their conception of "fun."

Most of the men he had worked and played with in Newcastle were now commissioned in the army or the air force; a few were in the R.N.V.R., serving in minesweepers and auxiliary vessels. Bill Gosdaile had always thought of himself as the leader of a set, looked up to, treated with a certain amount of deference. It was odd that he should be a corporal now while so many who had once been glad if he acknowledged their existence were lieutenants, captains, squadron-leaders, whom he was bound to salute if he saw them in the street. Yet the choice was his own, and he at least possessed the prestige which went

with the name "Commando," the new corps, the corps of attack, the corps which redeemed Britain from the defensive role imposed on her while she prepared, over-late, to fight with her whole strength. Corporal Gosdaile had known at once that the Commandos were the proper place for him, and he did not regret his decision.

He was an amateur boxer, middle-weight, of some local fame, fond of competitive beer drinking between fights, and proud, in the appropriately modest and off-hand fashion, of the collection of cups and medals kept on a sideboard at his home in Gosforth. He had twice, to his own surprise, found himself engaged to be married, and each time the girl had changed her mind. Each of them told him, one in tears, the other with a good deal of angry profanity, that he did not understand women, that he was insensitive, conceited, stupid and uncivilized. Each of them had declared her compassion for which ever girl ultimately was misled into marrying him. The first rupture left Bill Gosdaile comparatively unmoved: he had a championship match the following week which proved an adequate distraction. The second time a ring was returned to him he began, almost for the first time in his life, to turn his attention inwards on himself. For the benefit of the other men he knew in Newcastle, most of them smartly dressed, well-to-do, active, sporting, he affected to regard the broken engagements as an excellent joke, though he was clear in his own mind it was a joke not to be protracted, and once or twice, when a man showed a reluctance to change the subject, he had been ready to start a fight. This was what he called, in his own idiom, "getting tough." But within the privacy of his still infrequent introspections he admitted to himself, calling up another of his small store of standardized phrases, that the second girl at least had "shaken him up a bit."

Women, to Bill Gosdaile, were creatures wholly different from men. His manner changed immediately when he entered their company, and when he was among men again he felt, though he was unaware of this, a gratifying relief in all his nerves. Yet he liked to be with young women, to drink and joke with them, to look at them and to know they were looking at him: he liked dancing and going to theatres with them,

driving his car with a pretty girl beside him and estimating whether her notion of "fun" did or did not stop short at kissing. On the other hand, he took it for granted that one day he would "settle down," and he cherished a prophetic vision of himself, slightly older, as a happy, devoted—and adored—husband and father, living in a pretty suburban house with a large garden and a bridge table and a couple of dogs he could take out for a walk in the evening. It was disturbing to this vision that two young women, each of whom he sometimes thought (and was ashamed of the thought) had trapped him into a proposal of marriage, should of their own accord withdraw consent and, moreover, specify in detail his shortcomings as a potential mate.

Sooner or later whenever he began to think about women in this hurtful, perplexing and uninstinctive way, his mind revolted. Either he must get up and do something vigorous with his body or else unconsciously his thoughts turned to things and actions. Just at present he preferred to sit and watch Bobby Clough and Chester Park working at the sink, so it was natural that his thoughts should engage gratefully on them and on other members of his sub-section in the Commando. Being men, they were easy to understand. They posed no problems which could not be solved quickly, by rule of thumb. You did things in their company, on and off parade, and afterwards you discussed what you had done and what you were going to do: you sang songs with them, and played games, and skylarked, and always you could trust them. They were what they appeared to be, and in any situation you could depend on the way they would behave, each man after his nature responding as a soldier and as a comrade. Corporal Gosdaile had a phrase all ready to sum this up—"team work." You might have a row with one of them—Evan Morgan, for example, was quarrelsome when he had been on the booze. Morgan could use his fists clumsily but effectively. But once a row was over, it was forgotten. That was the advantage of being in a Commando: every man was a volunteer, specially selected from a much larger number of volunteers. Every man wanted to belong to the corps and was proud of it. They

though they had to cry down the emotional hero-worship of newspapers and magazines, and they often laughed to see the way strangers in streets and railway carriages stared at them, as if they belonged to some specially privileged order of manhood, supercharged with virility and story-book courage. They had a corporate pride in all the Commandos, but especially in their own, and they understood and trusted each other. It was a good life, Bill Gosdaile concluded: as good a life as a young man could look for in war-time, and once they had made a raid or two on enemy territory, to prove they were as skilful and determined soldiers as they strove to be, it would be an ideal life.

For the first time it occurred to him (as he reproved Chester Park, up to the elbows in greasy water, for putting out an inadequately cleaned spoon) that he was enlarging his experience of human nature. The commando men had all a great deal in common, yet there were among them endless diversions from basic type, especially if you looked back to their civilian upbringing.

Bobby Clough, for example, was a garage mechanic from Ardwick Green in Manchester. For all that he could remember, Corporal Gosdaile might in the past have told Bobby to grease his car and top up the batteries, and given him a cigarette and a shilling tip when the job was done. Bobby was full of local Manchester patriotism oddly intermingled with enthusiastic Left Wing internationalism. He was fond of denouncing (and mispronouncing) "the bourgeoisie," and he would not let any one in his hearing objurgate the Germans as Germans. "That's preaching race hatred," he would say. "That's as bad as that chap Vansittart." Some of the men liked to draw Bobby out on politics. They would ask him whether he would refuse to kill until he had made sure his enemy carried a Nazi party membership card in his breast-pocket.

Bobby sometimes had long non-political arguments, richer in invective than in logic, with Frank Fletcher, who came from Everton, in Liverpool, and despised Manchester. Frank was earnest, pious, sober in habit and carefully pure in speech. He might have had an uncomfortable time in the Commando for he sometimes expressed moral misgivings over the more blood-

thirsty parts of their training and avowed he would kill only reluctantly, never with passion, as a moral duty, strictly on principle. What saved Frank from trouble was his strength and vigour and efficiency in soldiering, and even more his natural ability at games. He had been a professional footballer for a London club but was always hankering to play in the blue shirts and blue-striped white shorts of the Everton Club. Twice he had been chosen for a Football League XI and everyone in the Commando was prepared to swear that Frank would get several international caps after the war. Bobby Clough disputed with him constantly, but whenever he went home on leave to Manchester boasted that one of his pals was "Frank Fletcher, the best out-side right since Billy Meredith."

The quietest man in the sub-section was Arthur Binfield, who had worked in a biscuit factory at Reading but possessed few of the marks of a townsman. Arthur kept himself to himself: he had the surest and stealthiest feet for night operations, and the keenest eyes. Wherever he was billeted there would be, once or twice a week, rabbits or partridges or grouse brought in a sandbag and deposited without a word in the kitchen. But Sergeant Cluny was almost as self-contained, though his quietness did not seem so natural: it was rather a discipline he had imposed on himself.

The sergeant was shorter even than Bobby, red-faced with small monkey-like features and deep creases running from his nose to the corners of his wide mouth. He was a pre-war soldier from Glasgow, a stickler for efficiency, who prepared himself and his men day and night with but one end in view—the overthrow of the enemy. Hector Cluny was the only man in the sub-section who had been in action: he had gone to France with the first expeditionary force in the autumn of 1939 and waited there, save for a patrol period in front of the Maginot Line, till the Germans broke into Holland and Belgium, till the British advanced and then, with cracking and surrendering armies on their flanks, withdrew to Dunkirk and across the English Channel. So much the others knew about Sergeant Cluny, and little else. His father had also been a sergeant in the same

the Military Medal before he was killed at Messines in 1917. Cluny was proud of his father, proud of Glasgow, and proud of his former regiment, the Highland Light Infantry. He would not talk about Dunkirk. "Forget it, man," he would say, "our job's to put all that straight again." It was rumored that he had once been a heavy drinker, but now, like Frank Fletcher, he would not touch even a glass of beer. The easy off-duty ways of the Commando puzzled him a little, but when things were to be done he secured perfect discipline and instant obedience, because the men he commanded felt that he carried within him, like a permanently clenched fist, an obdurate purpose. Cluny disliked brawling and argument, and only smiled to himself when other men were laughing and singing. He thought that everyone else talked too much, and he could stop a fight, in the street or in a public-house, in a second or two, by saying: "Save it up for the bloody Jerries."

Sergeant Cluny was the only man that Evan Morgan and Harry Lomax were afraid of, and their respect for him had nothing to do with the authority of his three stripes. Morgan and Lomax professed themselves tough guys, and because of this each of them had had a long but inconclusive fist fight with Chester Park. Park had to concede nearly thirty pounds in each fight, but he had a longer reach and knew how to take advantage of it. Corporal Gosdaile thought poorly of the boxing ability of all three, but he knew well enough that a fight was not a boxing match and a lucky blow could make nonsense of all the skill in the world. He was glad that Park came out unbeaten; it meant that the other two respected him.

The American was popular. The rest of the sub-section had expected him to brag, to patronize everything British, to talk in loud superlatives. Instead he was one of the politest, friendliest fellows imaginable, and his careful manners often made others look, and sometimes feel, uncouth. He came from Victoria in Texas: he was a bellhop in the Denver Hotel there till he was eighteen; after that he had been a truck driver; an assistant (he called it a "clerk" and rhymed it with "dirk") in a chemist's shop (which he called a "drug store"); an extra in film studios at Hollywood; an in-shore fisherman; and a fake cowboy on a

ranch in the holiday season. He had lived in Canada for two years before the outbreak of war and for some reason he had found a good deal of trouble in getting into the Commando—sometimes he hinted that he had effected the transfer only by standing an official from the American Embassy a succession of mint juleps at the Ritz Bar in Piccadilly. To Evan Morgan, a collier from Wrexham, Chester Park was not quite real, but nothing outside Wales had the full flavour of reality for Evan, a sloping shouldered, handsome but clumsily built man with more music than common sense in him when he was sober, and a savage, unpredictable temper when he had drunk too much. Harry Lomax also liked to drink hard once a week, but he was always happy, a loud-voiced, assertive Cockney, plump and shiny-faced. Harry prided himself on “knowing all the answers”: he was stored with knowledge of human wickedness and thought it all a great joke. He knew the wide world, too, through the cinema and sensational magazines, and was for once impressed when he discovered that Chester Park had appeared in crowd scenes with James Cagney and Rita Hayworth.

They had come to the Commando from many different regiments, and each man, while the War Office still debated a suitable head-dress for the new corps, wore his own regimental cap badge. Some had been poor, some comfortably off, some niched securely in the economic structure of their civilian world, some by nature restless, experimental, nomad. All except Sergeant Cluny were war-time volunteer soldiers, and but for the war it was unlikely that any one of them would have known any of the others. In temperament, outlook and little tricks of speech and thought and emotion and prejudice they differed widely. What they had in common was youth and strength and a specialised war-time task. Pride, vanity, ambition, the need for adventure, the allure of danger beyond the common, or some such impulse, had prompted them to become Commando men. They were soldiers set apart and bound together by the segregation. They knew the terms of their engagement: no extra pay and no privileges beyond the independence which went with, finding and paying for their own lodging and food wherever they happened to be, instead of looking to the army

for such provisions. They were to be used in small bodies, usually by night, for hazardous raids on occupied Europe. They were to demonstrate to the Nazis, to the British people, and to the rest of the world, that even while Britain bided her time, the British Army had still the will and the ability to strike hard blows at the enemy. Each man could expect death to-morrow, and they were told bluntly that any of them might, during a raid, be ordered to carry out an action from which he could not be expected to return. They were there to be used hard, as if they were made of steel instead of flesh and blood. They were odd and often roughly shaped elements, yet they fitted neatly together into a smoothly working whole, a machine designed for war.

Assembling these perceptions, haphazardly and rarely with clear definition, in his mind, Corporal Gosdaile considered the personality of the youngster who had just joined the billet. O'Donovan had come to the Commando a week ago, on the day after his nineteenth birthday. He had volunteered when he was eighteen, a point very much in his favour, and had completed twelve months' training with a battalion of the Middlesex Regiment. He was the youngest in the sub-section, and so far he had remained one apart. He could not be readily classified, like most of the others. Sometimes he seemed more than a little taken aback by the ribald jokes and songs and the rough horse-play with which commando men amused themselves off duty. But then Frank Fletcher kept out of all that. On the other hand, Frank had his status as a footballer to back up his preference for quiet behaviour and seemly speech. O'Donovan, so far as any one knew, possessed no qualification for demanding respect beyond what he could do as a member of the Commando—which had yet to be proved. He was only a kid, and a new-comer, and it was natural enough for him to sing small at first, to let others do the talking, to take advice, asked or unasked. It would have been easier, though, if he had a more ordinary personality. Corporal Gosdaile was not at all sure the boy was by nature modest. He seemed to hang on tight, obstinately, worldlessly, to some private valuation of himself.

A number of men had for various reasons left since the Com-

mando was formed: because they were pugnacious but undisciplined fighters; because they broke down physically or nervously under the stress of the training; because they lacked personal initiative. Officers had gone as well: some because, though they liked the prospect of danger, they disliked the hard work of preparing for it; some because they were irresponsible; some because they were too fond of taking their pleasure in cocktail bars and the ballrooms of expensive hotels. They had been a picturesque crew, the first officers allotted to the Commando: they produced coloured tunics for mess dinners and off duty most of them wore tweed coats of broad-checked cloth with coloured silk mufflers and suède leather shoes. You never quite knew where you were with them, for they might be matey off duty yet inhumanly disdainful on parade. Bobby Clough, in particular, hated them and called them a pack of class-conscious playboys. Most of them had gone. Captain Blanchard was the only one properly belonging to that elegant set who survived: he was fond of expensive and fashionable pleasures, but he never let up on his duties. The whole Commando was being sifted down, whittled and reinforced to make sure that every man came up to the standard exacted by the commanding officer, who, in the interests of efficiency, was ready to throw out the sons and nephews of some of his oldest and best friends, men from the Guards, the Household Cavalry and other crack regiments. R.T.U.—Returned to Unit—was the drastic punishment held over all, officers, n.c.o.'s and men, a disgrace, though it carried no penalty at all, in the eyes of every commando man.

A few days earlier the C.O. had talked long and earnestly to the non-commissioned officers, some of them men who had surrendered commissions in other corps for the privilege of entering the Commando. He had told them that only the best could survive his investigations, and the best was not too good for his Commando. He would see to it that only first-class officers and n.c.o.'s remained: there was a threat in that which none of them overlooked. But the men in the ranks he could not hope to know as intimately and he relied on the sergeants and corporals to see that every private soldier came up to standard.

"Test them all," he said. "Watch each man as an individual. Don't form a hasty judgment. Give him a fair chance over three or four weeks. Then, if you believe he is going to be too slow or too rash or liable to panic, come and tell me about him in confidence. I want to be able to trust every man in this Commando not only to sacrifice his life if need be—that's comparatively easy—but to do the right thing at the right time, even when no order can reach him."

And here was O'Donovan, newly joined, on probation, a mere kid, tall and stringy, who claimed to be Irish, but had shown no signs yet of being drawn into a fist fight. He had what the others considered a genteel accent—"Don't talk B.B.C." Bobby Clough would say to him—and his home seemed to be somewhere near London. There were plenty of very Irish Irishmen in the Commando, but they were not O'Donovan's type and he was rarely seen with them. He had not been picked for the demonstration attack that morning, but Gosdaile had taken him through the assault course under fire and at intervals watched his behaviour carefully. Twice the kid had lagged behind, and, crossing the pool in the river, he had stepped into a hole, gone under water and got his rifle wet. But, unlike the others, he was new to that sort of thing. When it was all over, he had looked a bit queer, staring at Bobby Clough's bleeding arm while they waited for the first-aid men to come up. Sergeant Cluny had noticed that, too, though he did not seem to think there was anything in it. On the whole the kid had done pretty well, though the corporal was not yet convinced he had enough stamina. A nineteen-year-old might be very willing and yet have overgrown his strength. It would be easier if O'Donovan revealed himself a bit more. No one knew yet what sort of a chap he was.

CHAPTER 4

The Rope and the Rock

ALL day they marched across the fell tops by sub-sections strung out in single file on different routes, miles apart. They avoided valleys and paths and all but the highest crag-guarded passes, moving across heather and frosty turf and rock and sometimes across snow, from one summit to the next. It was not marching as the Army had taught them to march, each man contributing to the muscular cadence of the others, yielding the control of his body to an imposed necessity and sustained by it. Nor was it walking, or climbing either, but a method of progress between the two, an adaptation to the uneven surface of the high ground under their feet. There was a technique to it, which had to be learned and mastered and practised. With each sub-section went a civilian, expert in fell-walking and rock-climbing, to act as instructor and guide. He taught them not to hasten on the upslopes nor to walk on their toes, to keep a steady pace, to splay the foot slightly outwards as it came down, so that there was firm purchase for the next thrust, which was to be made not so much from the knees as from the hips.

The air on the heights was invigorating: they breathed long and deep, and the cold stimulated their energy. Nevertheless movement was slow and when, at midday, after six hours without a halt lasting more than a few minutes, they stopped to eat and rest and trace their progress on the map, they were disappointed. All their Commando training had impressed upon them the value of speed, and this laborious crawling across the convolute surface of mountain country seemed to them a retrogression, a falling back into an earlier age, before the petrol engine and gas-operated recoil springs transformed the pace of

war. Sergeant Cluny had told his sub-section that these two days were to be regarded both as a test of stamina and as field training in difficult country. The men were able to appreciate the force of this argument already, for now they were halted they could feel that remote and rarely used muscles in their bodies had been under strain. The mountain air, for all its immediate exhilaration, took deep draughts of their vitality, and all through the long morning sergeant had never ceased to remind them that they were soldiers, not tourists out for pleasure.

There had been, the men considered, little danger of falling into that error, for at every momentary rest the sergeant had made them estimate the tactical situation, presuming an enemy to be within range, and ordered them to dispose themselves for defence and counter-attack. Even now, while they ate their midday bread and cheese and drank sparingly from whatever they had brought in their water-bottles (knowing that when that was finished there would be nothing to drink except water from such streams and mountain pools as remained unfrozen), the sub-section maintained guards, kept under cover, and had placed its weapons to go into action at a moment's notice. The fact remained that in six hours of hard toiling they had covered scarcely seventeen miles. The other sub-sections—there were two of them in sight, lodged, also for the midday halt, under the summits of nearby hills—had moved no faster. But that was small consolation. The tweed-clad civilian who was guiding them seemed to be less tired than they: he was, it appeared, a schoolmaster on holiday, an amateur mountaineer who did this sort of thing, but usually in Switzerland, for holiday amusement. It was true he carried far less weight—a grey-green rucksack and a long coil of rope slung around his waist. But he must be fifty if he was a day, and there he was now, not even sitting, but strolling round among the group of resting soldiers, cheerful, casual, precise in speech, with never a trace of weariness in his pink face or his spare-fleshed body.

Frank Fletcher, frowning and fretting, rubbed knuckles and finger-tips into his calves, and then into his thighs. This sort of plodding sustained exercise, he considered, would tighten his

muscles and do his football no good at all. Corporal Gosdaile, though his conception of discipline forbade him to speak openly, agreed: a few weeks of this would reduce him to the slow-footed, punch-exchanging status of a heavyweight, without ringcraft and unable to get away from the ropes except by rushing out with head down and arms swinging. Evan Morgan thought poorly of the Cumberland fells by comparison with Snowdon (which he had never seen except as a peak on the horizon) and declared that hills were no use to anyone, except in summer when you might take a girl of an evening to walk up a path till it was lonely enough to sit down. Surprisingly, the one who had no misgivings, who appeared to enjoy the new experience whole-heartedly, was O'Donovan. When he had eaten, he stood up and walked a few yards away, staring around him. Presently the others saw him sit on a slab of rock and pull out from the grenade pocket of his trousers a pad of paper. Next they saw him take out a pencil.

"Funny time to write letters," said Harry Lomax

"He's not writing."

"Go on with you. Where's your eyes? I can see his pencil."

"Watch a bit more carefully," said Chester Park. "Watch the way his hand moves."

They decided O'Donovan must be making a sketch-map.

"Going to be the good soldier."

"The kid's out after promotion."

"Bet he's waiting for the sergeant to go over and see what a lovely little map he's made."

"Corporal! Corporal Gosdaile! Take a dekko at young O'Donovan. Making a sketch-map, he is. Better watch your step. He's after a stripe, and then he'll want another, and another after that."

"Oh, leave the kid alone."

"He's keen anyway. What's wrong with that?"

Curiosity got the better of Bobby Clough. He walked across to stare over O'Donovan's shoulder.

"Eh, lad, that's a funny sort o' map?"

"It's not a map."

"What is it then?"

"Just a sketch."

"You mean a drawing?"

Still intent on the scene before him and the block of paper propped on his knee, the black-haired boy nodded. A minute later he said, "These are only rough notes. Later on I might work them up into something, if I get a chance."

"You mean, make a real drawing?"

"Perhaps. If I could remember the colourings, I might use oils."

Bobby was impressed.

"Do you mean you're an artist?"

"I might be a painter one day," O'Donovan admitted.

Bobby went back and told the others. "They're not exactly what you'd call proper drawings. Not shaded-in, if you know what I mean. He called it taking notes. See those two rocks coming up over there, out of the turf? Well, he'd got the shape of them, and that ridge beyond, and where it dips. See? And then he'd written across one part the colour it was. And another part, he'd written 'shadow.' I never knew artists worked like that. I thought they just got out their paints and propped up an easel and copied what they could see."

"I thought they always had long hair."

"No, they don't," said Harry Lomax. "And I'll tell you for why. 'Cause a chap I know at home, an electrician he is, he paints pictures. Been to an art school. Evenings. And what's more, he's had a picture in an exhibition in the Whitechapel Gallery. And his hair's no longer'n mine. Ordinary sort of chap he is, too."

It was just like Harry to put on an act. He would never admit that anything could surprise him. Whatever happened, he would always claim to have a precedent or a parallel in his own experience. But the others were surprised, and pleased. They would suspend judgment on O'Donovan's painting till they had seen him at work with brushes and tubes and canvas; then they would give their opinions freely. But in the meantime a hitherto unsatisfied question was appeased in their minds. They now had what Chester Park called a slant on young O'Donovan. They had found a label to attach to all the random observations

they made of his personality: he was an artist, and therefore entitled to be a bit queer, a bit different from other men. Anything odd that he said, and even his silences, could not be accounted for. He possessed a quality peculiar to himself, nothing to do with soldiering, but a point of reference for their barely articulate tests and estimations. His place in their tiny community began to take shape.

They were ordered to move on before the cold stiffened into their limbs. There was no further halt till nightfall, but this second part of the day passed more easily than they had expected, partly because they had become used to the thin mountain air, and partly because their progress now took the form of an infiltration exercise. The pedagogic mountaineer left them, after appointing a rendezvous for the early morning: they were consoled by this, assuming that the fifty-year-old was physically unfit to finish the day with younger men, still less to sleep out on a mountain-side. He went away downhill with great leaps and dislodgings of small stones.

The larger lakes, Windermere, Coniston and Ullswater, lay far to the east, and from Thirlmere and Derwentwater, to the north, they were now turning away. Here tall bare fells, capped and freaked with snow, thrust and huddled close together, as though the volcanic convulsion which had thrown them up, proud and recalcitrant, were but an event within reach of memory, as little softened by time as the angular rocks by the swaddling turf which incompletely covered them. Here at the central upheaval of a mountain storm, stilled in a gesture of majestic agony, there seemed no space left for long valleys to fill with lake water. All the land in sight had been tossed up and hurled together into a compressed entanglement of mountains. They passed a tarn, remote below them, ice-bound, seemingly small, receded at the margins, glittering pallid except where the great shadow cast by the fell—for it was not late afternoon—swept forbiddingly across. The bad weather, the last rage of winter, had prompted the shepherds to gather the mountain sheep into stone folds in the lower valleys. Now and again, when the wind shifted, the men plodding obstinately along, with scarce a word exchanged among them, caught in

their ears the sound of vibrant bleating from some distant fold in a valley out of sight: it was fragmentary, diminished, a wisp of sound torn away a moment later as the wind rose. Except for the wind, the occasional click as a boot struck rock, the melancholy call of a plover and sometimes a hawk wheeling by, and the persistent noise of tumbling water from the larger water-courses, they moved in a spacious silence. The whole barren lofty landscape was theirs alone, one steep hill folding sharply into another, and each ridge ahead, as it was gained, opening the prospect of other ridges, equally bleak. There was in sight neither road nor house nor any human creatures except themselves. They had wandered into the utmost solitude of a small island, an island at war, besieged and bombarded by its enemies, crowded with troops and busy civilians, but here void of all humanity except the individual and corporate spirit they carried in their tired bodies.

Arthur Binfield thought it a savage country and compared it, slowly, his mind scarcely conscious of the comparison it was making, with the smooth chalk downs and lush river valleys of Berkshire. Evan Morgan whistled a hymn tune and thought of the many sins he had committed, drunkenness and fornication notable among them, in his thirty years of life. Sergeant Cluny decided he would like to meet the Nazis again in this kind of country and in this kind of weather; they prospered on sunshine and drought, so let them tackle something less to their liking. The soldier they all called, sooner or later, Yank, never suspecting he considered the epithet an insult, wondered that he had ever complained against the summer heat in California and Texas: these English hills looked smaller to him than to his comrades, but he liked them, at the moment, none the better for that. Frank Fletcher thought of certain psalms and was disappointed that he felt so weak a sense of exaltation here where Wordsworth, a good man though a poet, had found much spiritual profit. Bobby Clough was suddenly homesick for the Ardwick Green Empire, second house on a Saturday night. Corporal Gosdaile repressed the cynical reflection that no generals or journalists came to see the commando men performing to-day: such spectators never moved far from a motor road.

Harry Lomax still talked occasionally as he marched, but even he had little to say and repeated himself often: the burden of his observations was that he would give a lot to be in a nice warm fish-and-chip shop in the Mile End Road. Only Emmet O'Donovan carried his head high. He smiled often to himself, oblivious of the men in front and behind, his eyes bright but almost blind to mountain-side, crag, watercourse and sky, for he moved lightly on, sustained by a day-dream in which he was comrade to Finn and Cuchulain and other legendary Irish heroes marching to war across Irish hills which, to him, were just as legendary and undisturbed by the touch of reality.

It was dusk before they came to a rude square of stone walls, three feet high, designed to shelter walkers and climbers in the holiday season of summer against sudden changes of day-time weather. But now there was more to be endured than a chill wind mocking the sunshine or a drift of mountain mist blanketing the pass for an hour or two. The winter daylight faded rapidly around them: peak after peak was submerged in the oncoming dusk. Sergeant Cluny showed them on the map that behind the great hillside where they were preparing their bivouac reared the still higher summits of the Scafell Pikes, while if they advanced a little farther the ground would slope steeply and roughly downwards, and they could look left by Lingmell Beck into the narrow sheer-sided valley of Wastwater, or right, by Sty Head Pass, to Seathwaite and the head of Borrowdale. Either way they would find, within a few miles, despite the apparent solitude where they stood now, men and women, warmth, food, house-shelter. Their halting-place for the night had been chosen so that, should the hard weather change abruptly to storm, they might be able to seek the inhabited valleys. They were to be hardened, up here in this bleak solitude, but not unduly imperilled. With ground-sheets to sleep on, greatcoats to cover them, and stone walls to break the force of the mountain wind, they could sleep out through the winter night. Frost would do them no harm, but the sentries were to watch for snow and sleet: if that came, they must all rouse and if necessary break away downhill for hot food and drink and blankets; at the least, they must keep moving.

The wind, however, instead of rising, fell to a mild gustiness before, in darkness, they had finished their dry, cold food and the tea they brewed over a wood fire, screened with a ground-sheet and stamped out as soon as the water boiled. Before the first two sentries were posted, and the others had chosen places next the walls to stretch themselves for sleep, the air was quite still, and they fell into tired sleep amid a silence disturbed only by the soft occasional movement of the sentries and now and then the stir and crackle of hoar-frost crystallising on the grass blades and striking deeper into the turf. The sentries could see only a short distance; the moon was new and would not rise till early morning. Though the wide expanse of the sky was lit with myriads of stars—"shining away as hard as they can, to keep themselves warm," said Bobby Clough—the hills around were draped in nocturnal shadow, scarcely traceable except where they lifted to shut out the stars from view. The men in the bare bivouac were not by temperament or usage given to philosophical meditation; their minds jibbed away from abstracts and impalpables, turning gratefully to the immediate utilities of human existence: they were tired men, besides, and even while they slept complete ease of body, nerve and mind was denied them, for the hardening frost penetrated the double thickness of battle-dress and greatcoat and, in sleep, their mittened hands reached out to recover blankets that were not there. Yet when, by pairs, they were roused as the night progressed to take their turn on guard, and stood up, yawning and stretching the stiffness out of their limbs, white frost glimmering on khaki cloth and hair and eyebrows, the still, poised, frozen majesty of the night on the hilltop imposed itself on each of them. They were a little awed by it: it gripped each man in the essence of himself, beneath the surface of consciousness, where even the unworded, unwordable venturings of secret thoughts could not insinuate. When one sentry spoke to his fellow-sentry, he whispered, lest the uneasy sleepers be disturbed, and he spoke only of trivial things. Yet each man, as his turn came to keep watch, was profoundly aware of the hills and the stars and the outspread solitude not only enveloping his senses but existing mysteriously, and not unbenignantly it seemed, within him.

It fell to O'Donovan and Chester Park to take the last turn on guard. The slender, unemphatic moon had shone for a while but was hidden by a hilltop when they moved out beyond the stone walls, muttering softly to themselves against the chill in the air and in their blood, and the darkness which now reached its utmost intensity. By the time the first glimmer of dawn was visible they had found, as wakeful men always find, the cold more bearable. They noted the light in the east to each other, and then fell silent. Daybreak came slowly, austere, but unimpeded by cloud. It was a subtle enrichening of visibility, immeasurable, a gradation of changes which could not be separated by the most careful observation. Light was not poured out but vouchsafed from the rim of the visible world, a world which enlarged itself moment by moment. Staring this way, there was no alteration to be seen; but when they turned away, and then brought back their gaze, what had been a screen of shadow, a silhouetted hint of vast but undefined shape, was now a substantial wedge of mountain, or a long rift cut out of the rock, or a doubly folded slope of frosted turf, with depth now added to length and breadth. Then the daylight changed its quality, passing from dim to lustrous. The frost crystals near at hand, engraving grass and bracken, leaf and stone, glittered and sparkled, iridescent with colour, and tints of pink and blue and green woke in the snowdrifts. The frost still crisped the air and bit into the hard ground under their feet. Looking away again, they saw peaks and crags and basalt buttresses taking shape in the distance, circumscribing them with mountain grandeur. Behind, seemingly clapped upon the crest under which they stood, the Scafell Pikes and two other conical summits reared their snow caps fantastically high. The stars were almost dimmed out. The earth was born again in sight of their eyes and, for all its bareness, the spectacle fortified them. Life suspended through long hours of darkness, seemed to renew itself with unhurried confidence in this long slow transmutation, this prodigious creative act.

But they were hungry again and the sleepers, once roused, felt stiff and resentfully aware of the cold. They built another fire to make tea, and ate. They set the radio to work again, reporting

"nothing to report" and then caught sight of their civilian guide, tiny, remote, recognisable only through field glasses, as he climbed slowly up the stony winding path to meet them. The sun rose clear, in golden and crimson radiance, as they breakfasted, but they took that as a matter of course, for now they were soldiers again, with scarce a private thought or emotion, and another day of tasks and ordinances lay in front of them. Only O'Donovan retained the fresh impetuous recollection of the morning's exhilaration. His body felt flexed and strong, his mind sure, clear, confident. On such a day, he felt, he could do nothing wrong. God had placed a benedictory finger upon him, and every word of his, every thought, every act, every step, would be guided and, of self-evidence, triumphant. He was silent but joyful, and within himself serenely exultant.

As soon as they had tidied up the bivouac and accoutred themselves, they moved off to meet their guide at Sty Head Tarn. The old schoolmaster was very cheerful. He gave them cigarettes, told them that later on they were to be taught the elements of the sport of rock-climbing, and, when he had talked to Sergeant Cluny, led them off down a narrow rocky path to catch a glimpse of Wastwater. He insisted urgently that they must not be in Westmorland and miss that sight on a fine clear morning, so they toiled on for a few minutes and stopped where the path twisted to open a prospect of the narrow valley, the lake lying in long perspective in front of them, grey and sombre. It was overshadowed by the steep fell sides which rose direct, on the south, from the shore, with long scree of loose stones beaded savagely from crest to foot. They stood in clear, white sunshine: but Wastwater, far below them, was a trap for dark shadows, and such light as penetrated streamed down in rigid diagonal bars out of a cloud, as if arranged for a steel engraving.

They turned to climb back, the sergeant making them take this approach as a field exercise; one party provided mock covering fire while the other advanced upwards, and two snipers reconnoitred the flanks, stalking from boulder to boulder. The schoolmaster went ahead till this was finished. When they caught up with him, he expected them to rest, but the sergeant

would have none of that and, though they grumbled a little under their scant breath, they were glad of the chance to show something for the thirty years' advantage of their youth. They struck away from the path, following the course of a tumbling brook, its ghylls and races impeded by crusted ice, and made a long rough climb to a tongue of high land stretched between peaks which the guide distinguished as Great Gable and Green Gable to the east and Kirk Fell Crag on the west. Here the wind took on a knife-slitting coldness: they had frequently to climb, with sliding tentative feet, over frozen snow, and on the peaks to either side, now only a few hundred feet above them, they could see snow drifted deep, piled against the rocks, silted into crevices and gullies, smooth, unbroken surfaces of resplendent white. The sweat crawled warm on their chilled flesh, and their breath condensed on the brittle air as it left mouth and nostrils. The schoolmaster led them steadily on—he was as eager and purposeful now as if he were a youngster himself—across the far slope of Kirk Fell, down into the colder shadows of Black Sail Pass, then upward again for a two-mile scramble along a high ridge till at last he told them that they had come to the Pillar, to the place where they were to practice the craft of rock climbing.

Now they could look down and round in the clear morning light on mile after mile of rugged fells, hill slopes and peaks twisted fantastically into knots with here and there, beyond the lower shoulders, segments of the valley lakes showing silver rather than blue: Wastwater again, and to the north-west the smaller shapes, but set in wide plains, of Crummock Water and Buttermere. The guide led them rapidly on and then down a sliddery fold in the ground till they stood at the foot of a long slope of turf, about five hundred feet in all, thickly covered, for it was on the northern flank of the hill, with snow. Where the turf stopped, a wide cliff of rock, slabbed and stratified, with ice and snow flecked plentifully into its rough surface, uprose starkly to the summit. As they tilted their heads back to look at it, the cliff seemed to be almost vertical, but the guide assured them that when they reached it they would find a way to the top, by a series of short furrows which he called chimneys and

ledges, at something less than forty-five degrees. Plainly the old chap regarded the task as an elementary exercise.

He made them ascend the snow slope in a strung-out line, each man following his own route, testing the solidity of the snow in front of him before he moved up, and then hacking out a step for himself with the blade of his entrenching tool.

"If you were doing this in earnest," their preceptor said, "one man would naturally cut the path, and the others follow. But what you need is to learn how, and practise it."

He told them also that in Britain snow slopes, even so brief and shallow as this, were rare: but in certain parts of the world, Switzerland for example, not to speak of the Himalayas and the Andes, it was possible to climb for hours on end over snow which might be frozen to ice or deep and soft with thaw, or a mere mask for a crevasse hundreds of feet deep. That set them thinking and debating names of northern countries where perhaps they were destined to make raids.

When they had all climbed to the top of the solid snow and could see that the cliff face above them was not so steep as it had appeared from below, though formidable enough, the schoolmaster went, slowly and emphatically, over the heads of the lecture he had given them the day before they left.

"It's only an outside chance," he said, "that you'll ever need to do any real rock-climbing with or without a rope. You're here to-day to learn to guard against that outside chance. You'll get a little elementary practice and pick up a few tips. That's all. And when this war's over, don't any of you imagine you are pukka rock climbers and can swarm up any mountain or sea-cliff you come across. Now about your hands and feet. The golden rule is: have three holds before you let go with the other. Test every hand-hold, in particular, thoroughly well before you put your weight on it. The rock here is sound—better than you'll find in many places—but even so you may find it come away in your hands. Or you may kick it loose. Then it's up to those below to look out for loose stones falling on their heads. You ought to have climbing irons for winter and rubber or rope-soled boots for summer. But you've got to make do with your army boots. That's why I've chosen this easy climb for you. Remem-

ber, four men on the rope. I lead. And only one man moves at a time. The others must keep still and hold fast. It will be their job to anchor the rope if he falls. Now the first three will tie on."

It went better than they had expected. It was truly a kind of sport, slow, with long pauses between difficult activities, thrusts and haulings never without tension. One by one they acquired some mastery of the technique, learned to sprawl flat with outspread arms and bent knees to traverse flat-faced rocks; to kick ice and pebbles from tiny ledges to make purchase for their feet; to slide hand and wrist into tiny crevices scarcely visible at first; to circumvent overhanging embedded boulders; to prop back and shoulders, hands and feet, against the side walls of a gulley. It was slow, arduous, rhythmical, careful yet exhilarating.

All went well for nearly an hour and then the moment of unforeseen danger came, expanded violently in all their minds, and was gone. It came when their nerves were relaxed, and from a quarter they had at no time distrusted. It came through a mistake made by the one expert member of the party. Three times the roped ascent had been made, and three times the schoolmaster had lowered himself, swarming rapidly downwards alone to begin again. He was always the topmost in every climb, the first man on the rope, for that was where skill and experience were most needed. He had reached the top of the cliff for the fourth time and unroped himself, holding the loose end of the manilla cord fast, and piling an increasing coil of it at his feet as the second man came over the top, then the third. The fourth and last man—it was Bobby Clough—had reached a point only a few yards below the edge of the cliff, with no more than half a dozen not very difficult hand- and foot-holds to pass before he reached safety. The two who had just arrived at the top, unroped now, stood breathing heavily, pleased with themselves, calling ironical encouragements to Bobby. Others, longer rested, were standing there also, among them O'Donovan.

A small ledge in the rock, to which they had all in turn been directed by their guide and which had safely taken the weight

of Evan Morgan as well as the lesser weights of the others, broke off as Bobby put his right foot on it. The thrust of his muscles sent his leg loose and unbalanced him. He lost his other grips and in a second was hanging over the precipice, suspended only by the rope. And the rope in three convulsive jerks, sank lower and lower, for the schoolmaster, at the top of the cliff, was insufficiently braced to meet the sudden shock and could not keep his footing or his grasp on the rope. The danger shouted, wordlessly urgent in the sudden silence, through all their minds: the increasing and unstemmed pull on the rope threatened to send Bobby Clough in the next second or so hurtling down the rock face. There were three men nearer than O'Donovan, but it was he who got to the rope first, gripping it in front of the schoolmaster, on the very edge of the cliff, taking the strain and ending the disastrous slide away. The others came up quickly then to help, but it was O'Donovan who, leaning over, saw that the length of spinning rope, with the helpless man at the end, was being abraded against a flinty edge three yards down. He thrust his hand out, held the rope off, and ordered them all to swing it a few inches to the right.

When Bobby, bruised and resentful but unhurt, had at last been hauled to the top, the schoolmaster said: "My fault. I ought to have belayed." He thanked O'Donovan and said: "You did the right thing. You did it twice, and quickly, without any telling. I suppose you've had some climbing experience?"

O'Donovan shook his head.

He was gratified by the way the others were looking at him, by Sergeant Cluny's "Good lad!", by Corporal Gosdaile's friendly punch in the ribs, by the way Bobby, who had to have everything explained to him, shook his hand. Suddenly he had acquired in all their eyes personality, status, prestige. They were pleased that he took it all so quietly; but that was accidental. O'Donovan was possessed by an assurance which needed no outlet or reinforcement. When he had seen dawn come up a few hours earlier over their mountain bivouac, he had known that this was to be a day of days for him, a day in which he could do no wrong, when he would prove equal to every event

as it emerged out of the undisclosed future. He felt that he had consummated his manhood this day, up here in the cold thin air of the mountains, and he believed that all the rest of his life would be a protraction of these flawless and exquisite moments. He was nineteen years old.

CHAPTER 5

In the Corridor

COMING back from the restaurant car, after a war-time luncheon which left him neither still hungry nor satisfied, Alexander Brind felt the train slowing down and, stooping to look through the corridor windows, he saw grey stone cottages beside the track. No factories, mills, office buildings: a small town therefore. He ought to know the name of this station at which the train was about to pull up: he had been not so far away from here only a few weeks earlier, when he had come to see commando troops in training. He should be able to recognise this town, but for years he had done his travelling by car and, now that the war had forced him back to the railways, he found the knowledge of his youth grown misty and remote. Even the names of the railway companies had changed under these modern amalgamations: the London and North Western with its black and white carriages was merged with the Midland into the L.M.S. The Caledonian had gone, and the Lancashire and Yorkshire; the London Brighton and South Coast, too, and the Great Northern.

For this journey he had taken a route which meant changing from one system to another at Carlisle. There was a straighter, simpler way from Liverpool to Newcastle—he was sending to Fleet Street a series of articles on docks and shipyards in war-time—but it went drearily across industrial Lancashire and Yorkshire. He had preferred this route in order to catch a glimpse of the Cumbrian fells at closer quarters than on his previous visit, when he had been compelled to stop short at the foothills. He would not see the Lakes—they lay off the main line—but if he could trust his memory there was some goodish

mountain scenery to be viewed as the train pulled up the long gradient to Shap and Penrith. It was not likely that many passengers would join the train at—he stooped again and read the sign—Kendal; but it would be wise to make sure of retaining his seat. He walked the length of another coach and then found his compartment. Almost at once the train stopped.

He had guessed badly, for doors were torn open and newcomers climbed into the corridors. Most of them were heavily laden soldiers and they pressed clumsily this way and that to search for empty seats. There were none. The people in Brind's compartment looked at each other and exchanged murmurs of annoyance. They had paid for seats in this first-class coach, and they expected to be able to move up and down the corridor unhindered by standing passengers whom they suspected of holding third-class tickets. Brind's status as a special correspondent entitled him to first-class travel at his paper's expense, but he liked to think of himself as a man democratic in every corpuscle of his blood, who travelled expensively merely because it gave him a better opportunity to think undisturbed and more elbow-room if he needed to work with pencil and notebook. He stared round the compartment and summed up the other five there as purse-proud, selfish snobs. Nevertheless he was himself unreasonably irritated.

His seat was next the corridor: he would not see so much as a hillside if his view was blocked by people standing in the corridor. He felt tiredness aching in his bones and round his eyes. He never slept well in hotels unless he stayed for several successive nights: a stupid disability in one who had been a journalist for nearly forty years, but his ill-temper was not soothed by this reflection. Then he remembered that in an hour and a half he would be in Carlisle, where he must leave this train. It would be more gracious to surrender his seat now to someone travelling through to Scotland. He had sat in tolerable comfort all the way from London.

He rose, slid back the door, and edged his way into the corridor. It was packed tight with soldiers. They had unbuckled their equipment, and webbing straps and belts, ammunition pouches, haversacks, water-bottles, groundsheets and anti-gas

capas, glistening brown and green, rifles, Bren guns and sub-machine guns were stacked along the floor and against the outer wall of the corridor. Young men in khaki stood leaning back or leaning forward with elbows outspread on the wooden rails in front of the long windows, whistling and shouting to each other. They blocked the view up and down the corridor, which was now lurching from side to side as the train gathered speed. The noise they made, uncouth, inconsequent and vehement, jangled the older man's nerves. His quiet reflections fled before this intrusion of careless, loudly joyful youth.

"There's a seat in there for someone," he said, addressing them all, not particularising.

The soldiers did not hear him. He had to repeat the statement. Then they hesitated and looked at each other.

"I'm only going as far as Carlisle," Brind explained. He said that because he felt himself thrust willy-nilly into the posture of a benefactor, and hated it. It was as if he had added to his offer: you needn't think I'm giving up anything of value.

A sergeant, a short man with a plain face which the small features made slightly absurd in its solemnity, put an end to their irresolution. With a sharp Glasgow accent he called: "There's a seat down here for you, missus."

Brind saw then that among the soldiers, farther down the corridor, a woman was standing. She was stout, grey-haired, very tidy and respectable in a black coat and a black straw hat, as old as himself. She came swaying heavily towards him, clutching her leather bag and her raffia shopping basket, and then stopped short.

"But I haven't got a first-class ticket!" she exclaimed.

"Don't let that worry you ma'am. The train's packed end to end."

Brind turned sharply. The tall soldier, by his voice, was American, and from one of the Southern States at that. He had probably come over with the Canadians. Every regiment of the British Army seemed to have sent a representative into this corridor, but all infantrymen, for Brind, like any one else who has ever served a term in khaki, glanced first at regimental cap badges.

He spoke to the stout woman. She was evidently afraid of being called on to pay excess fare.

"If the ticket collector comes along," he said, "I'll take the seat back till he's gone."

"Thank you, sir. You're very kind."

She edged her way diffidently into the compartment and Brind closed the door and settled his shoulders against it, propping his feet against the wall. This lowered his head so that he could peer out through the corridor window: it was just like a railway company to make you stand and then make you bend to watch the scenery. But the scenery at that part of the journey was unexciting. There were no high fells yet in sight.

Glancing right and left inside the corridor Brind became aware of several things, which he told himself, he ought to have noticed before. The soldiers were commando men. He could now see the lettering at the top of their shoulder sleeves. They had become quieter: they were talking instead of shouting witticisms to each other. The whistling stopped. And standing five yards away down the corridor was a passenger who seemed out of keeping with this atmosphere of boisterous virility, subdued only, as Brind realised, because of her presence. She was a young woman, rather tall, slender, and she startled the eye, among all that khaki, with the vividness of her costume. She wore a short scarlet coat, hardly reaching to her hips, of suède leather, with a green scarf knotted at her throat. By straightening his back and tilting his head Brind could see, as the train, labouring uphill, jolted them all to and fro, that her skirt also was green, spreading full from the waist, pleated, green to match the scarf. Such simplicity of costume was expensive: he was sure she had a first-class ticket in her purse.

He watched her face, now in profile, now glancing at him and past him; she had a patrician loveliness, grey-eyed, casual, composed and unselfconscious under the covert stares of dozens of young men, for they were all nervously or assertively aware that she was young and beautiful, and the only woman in all their masculine company. There was tension, excitement, and a secret but sharp competitiveness in the air. In his mind Brind tried to depreciate the girl, accounting her good looks to a

luxurious upbringing, to choice food, fashionable dressmakers, hairdressers, beauty parlours. She could not be put away, however, merely as the product of her environment, large country houses with picture galleries and gun-rooms. Mayfair mansions, and fashionable restaurants. She was bred, but not quite to a type. She would have been a beauty even in a gipsy's rags and tatters: not that there was anything gipsy-like in her clear complexion, pink mantling under the white skin—or did that come out of a pot? Her hair was golden: Brind disliked the word “blonde,” which had spread like an infection since, as a young man, he first learned, on the *Manchester Guardian* under Scott and Montague, to be fastidious about words.

It was corn-golden hair, fine and glossy, unconcealed by any hat, and brushed up from the back and sides of her head, smooth and sheer, to a pinned coil at the top: the very way his wife had dressed her hair when first he met her and knew at once, Edwardian romantic that he was, he wanted to be her husband. His wife was dead these twenty years. Now he had lived long enough to see a fashion overpast, neglected, derided, come back to favour again; yet he had not lived long enough, it seemed, to outgrow the foolish, hot, speculative impulses of curiosity sprung from the casual proximity of a young beauty who, as likely as not, had neither wit, sense, manners nor morals to justify her existence. Probably the girl was no better than an idle flibbertigibbet who ought to be in uniform, working in blue or khaki to help get the country safely through this new-style, tear-away, uncontrollable war. Exceptionally beautiful women were almost always vain, and the very indifference of this girl's attitude as she lounged, graceful in her indolence, self-contained, oblivious of the young men watching her with spontaneous admiration and desire, marked her as worthless in Brind's estimation. He would not stop to consider the thought that he was blaming her because he knew guiltily that as sixty years he ought to have more sense than these young commando men in whom she had, merely by her presence, awakened romance or sensuality or mischief. Desire was proper in them, but match it with grey hairs and rheumatic twinges and it

became ludicrous: Brind preferred to pass judgment on the girl as an idle, upper-class hussy.

The soldiers around him were talking about her.

"Three blokes already have offered her a seat, but she's turned 'em all down."

Yes, that was the oddity about this situation: beauties, professional or amateur, were not usually left to stand in the corridors of trains, however crowded.

"Wonder where she'll get off."

"Not with you, mate."

"I didn't mean that. I meant, get off the train."

"Not where we do, I'll bet."

"No such luck."

"What are you worrying your head over, anyway? You'd have no chance, not even if she was living next door to your billet."

"Wouldn't I?"

"No, you wouldn't, Harry, so shut up for once."

The soldier with the plump face and the Cockney accent, who seemed to bounce every time he moved, took up the challenge in a hoarse whisper:

"Bet me a dollar I don't click with her?"

"When?"

"Right now."

"O.K. But you'll lose your money."

The corporal, however, intervened.

"The bet's off. Stay where you are, Lomax. And the rest of you, too. None of you chaps seem to know the difference between a tart and a lady."

It wasn't easy to spot that difference nowadays, Brind reflected. He was disappointed: he might have been able to observe an amusing little comedy, and he might have learned more about the girl with the green scarf. By now he had realised that her face was indefinably familiar: he supposed she was often photographed and he had seen her pictures lying about in the Fleet Street office or reproduced in the glossy society journals he sometimes picked up in the morning-room at the Reform Club.

The plump-faced commando man protested half-heartedly.

"What do you want to spoil sport for, Corp.? It's not even as if I was going to do the girl any harm. How could I anyways, here?"

"Annoying ladies is a breach of discipline, my lad."

"How do you know she'd be annoyed? I'll bet she likes a bit o' harmless fun."

"Don't argue. I've given you an order. It's in your own interest. If you get your face slapped here, you'll be R.T.U. Stay where you are and hold your trap."

"What about the calls of nature, Corp.!"

"There's another lavatory the other end of the corridor."

But a minute or two later, without a word to any one, the corporal began to make his way along the corridor, the sprawling men standing back against doors and windows to let him go by.

He apologised as he passed the girl and disappeared. When he returned, he halted beside her, shouldering another soldier, a tall youngster with black hair, out of the way.

"Well, I'm damned!"

"Look at the Corp.!"

"He's trying to get off with her himself."

"That's a dirty trick, if you like."

They watched him bend to peer out of the corridor window, —elaborately casual, then straighten up and pull out his cigarette-case.

They all kept very quiet, the better to hear what was being said.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Of course not."

"Perhaps you'll smoke yourself?" There was something self-consciously elegant in the way the corporal held the open cigarette-case towards the girl: for a second it was possible imaginatively to divest him of battle-dress and see him equipped with a tightly tailored lounge suit, a spotless white collar, a silk cravat and silk socks, the sort of young man who considered that any girl, however pretty, should be glad to be in his company.

But this elegant girl travelling alone shook her head, and the corporal had only his own cigarette to apply the flame of

his petrol lighter. He spoke about the weather, motor-cars, lawn tennis, asked if she had lunched on the train, asked if it had been a good lunch. She must have gone for the first service, Brind concluded: otherwise he would have seen her in the restaurant-car. Receiving only the briefest replies, the corporal at last gave up, and moved back to his former place. The others greeted him with friendly whispered derisions.

"Didn't get very far, did you?"

"Two stripes don't impress a dame like that. You'd have to be a colonel at least."

"She didn't slap your face, but lumme, she looked as if she might any minute."

"I was only being polite," said the corporal. He grinned. "But you can see for yourself, chaps, none of you'd have had a chance. And you're not even as tactful as I am."

"I don't know about that. Look what's happening now."

The girl had turned to the black-haired boy next her, who had been pushed out of the way by the corporal. The one who first observed this was positive she spoke first. Evidently she had asked for a cigarette. A moment later they were both smoking and talking.

"She wouldn't take one of yours, Corp.!" someone pointed out in a ribald whisper.

Perhaps the fortunate young man whom they were all envying heard that. He looked down the corridor and, still talking, stared at them without a smile. Then he turned his back and stood crosswise in the corridor, his arms spread out on either side, so that they could no longer see the girl.

And now Alexander Brind knew, jogging at the back of his mind, there had been a sense of familiarity, of untraced repetition, ever since he came out into the corridor. These were the same commando men he had watched in training and afterwards written about. He recognised the little Scots sergeant, and most of all he recognized the tall boy who had said he was looking at the blood on another man's hand to "memorise the colours." An interesting boy, and it was small wonder the girl found him more attractive than the corporal.

"Fancy young O'Donovan bringing it off."

"There's more in that kid than any of us reckoned on."

"If you ask me, she's doing the getting off."

An odd sort of girl, thought Brind. He wondered if she was ripe for a flirtation with any man, casually met, who took her fancy? The corporal had been too obvious for her taste. Or perhaps it was his air of the provincial man-about-town which offended her? Perhaps she had selected the boy they called O'Donovan (he was good-looking enough) as soon as he entered the train, would not bother with any one else, and when he was too timid to speak to her, took the initiative herself? But perhaps she was not flirting at all? Perhaps this was just her way of reproving the corporal?

It was a good quarter of an hour before the conversation was interrupted, and Brind noted regretfully that the train had hauled its slow way up Shap and all the high fells were left behind while obliviously he had concentrated on this little comedy inside the train. Someone came through from the rearward coach, and the sergeant called to the men: "Steady now. Here's the captain."

He did not recognise Brind, but Brind knew him at once as he pushed past: Blanchard, the officer who had been in charge of the training demonstration. It was strange these should be the same commando men he had watched toiling and sweating through mud and mire and explosions along the assault course in the twisted valley the week before last. He knew a little more about them now: they were no longer distant puppets in khaki; they had taken a few paces forward, emerged out of the impersonality of soldiers distinguished only by regimental number and function.

He turned to watch Blanchard's progress down the corridor, and all at once he knew that the captain was going to meet the girl with the green scarf. Of course! That was why her face had seemed familiar. She had the same slightly hollow-cheeked, fine drawn good looks as Blanchard.

He called out in his sharp, cheerful voice:

"Caroll! Caroll! There you are."

The young soldier propped by wrist and elbow across the corridor did not at first realise what was happening. He looked

round only when the girl waved over his shoulder. Then he sprang sharply to attention, head erect, heels together, hands at the side of his trousers.

"That's all right, O'Donovan. Stand easy. I thought I'd missed my sister altogether."

To the girl he added: "I've only just discovered there was another first-class coach on the train. Made sure you'd missed the train at Euston."

"So your name's O'Donovan?" said the girl. "Irish?"

The boy nodded.

Blanchard led her back past the others, still without a sign of knowing Brind from any other civilian. As the girl went by, so close to them that her perfume was startlingly vivid on the air, the commando men smiled awkwardly. They would never have spoken of her with such speculative freedom if they had guessed she was their captain's sister. The corporal tried to stare out of the window, but she was too beautiful to let go like that. He gave her an apologetic glance, obviously hoping she would not mention his attempt to strike up an acquaintance with her. As if she read his thoughts, she laughed, and the corporal knew he was safe from trouble.

Not an ordinary girl, after all, thought Brind.

The commando men decided she was a real sport, which was only what you'd expect from Captain Blanchard's sister. Brind guessed they would soon begin to talk admiringly, enviously, facetiously to O'Donovan about his brief triumph over the corporal. He decided O'Donovan would not enjoy that experience, so he moved down the corridor himself, to forestall them. For some reason, he wanted to know more about this youngster, and why he was interested in the colours of blood and mud and flesh. When he left the train at Carlisle, he had discovered. It was nearly an hour later before he began to wonder why the Commando was moving and where it was going.

CHAPTER 6

The Fiord

THE men did not learn their destination till the ship was three days out of the Scottish port. By that time signs that they were to engage the enemy were plain to read. The ship was steering a north-easterly course and now had a naval escort, identified by various deck-hands as a light cruiser, two destroyers, and three corvettes camouflaged for Arctic waters in dazzling patterns of green, white and ice-blue paint. Assault barges, with squared sides of grey steel and ramps to let down at either end, were slung on to the main deck and made fast there: over and over again the Commando had practiced on the British coast embarkation and re-embarkation from such boats. There were naval officers aboard, and to each sub-section a Norwegian guide and interpreter had been appointed. The Norwegians wore on the shoulders of their battle-dress a tiny blue cross outlined in white on a red background. They would not say where the raid was to be delivered—an excessive and irritating precaution now—only that they knew the place well: the commando men could expect a welcome from the inhabitants and must be careful to distinguish German uniforms and helmets. Any quislings would be sorted out by the Norwegian guides and brought back as prisoners.

On the afternoon of the third day every commando man on board was given cold-weather clothing: string vests to be worn under their shirts, thick-knit pullovers, and, to surmount that, white windproof coats and trousers, with woollen mittens and leather gauntlets, two pairs of socks, and extra large and heavy boots. There were also duffle coats, similar to those worn by the sailors on deck duty, but most of the men, when they had

adjusted and fitted their equipment over this Arctic kit, decided to dispense with them. As it was they paraded for inspection, so Bobby Clough said, "as broad as we're long," and when they tried to run about on the ice-sliddery upper decks they felt cumbrous and clumsy. The white coats and trousers were designed to make them inconspicuous against snow, but their khaki equipment, steel helmets, and the weapons they carried stood out the more vividly against the white. When they learned that they could expect, at most, less than four hours' daylight at the place—wherever it was—they were to land, they puzzled the more, till Sergeant Cluny reminded them that flares and rockets, tracer ammunition, breech explosions from guns, and shell bursts might very well make night as clear as day while the action lasted. Corporal Gosdaile, however, who believed that three years spent at a university had given his mind a logical quality, fretted over the discrepancy between khaki and white. He insisted on making his point to Captain Blanchard and at last secured permission to scour the ship for pipeclay and white paint. With this the whole sub-section treated their webbing and weapons, reducing them at least to a shade of pallid grey. Someone from another sub-section said they looked like a collection of ghosts: the superstitious took this as a bad omen, and for a few minutes first curses and then blows were exchanged.

"You chaps," said Sergeant Cluny, "are doing yourselves no bloody good on this ship. You're growing fat and lazy. The sooner you get ashore the better. Then we'll begin to know what you're worth."

He turned them out early next morning, in full kit, to run twenty times around the deck before breakfast, and laughed every time a man lost his footing and crashed on the ice-covered boards. The ship made slow progress, pitching heavily as she butted through onrushing seas whipped to foam by a screeching cold wind. The destroyers kept station well ahead, but the corvettes often swept around in skittish circles, bucking up and down the huge waves like carnival dolphins. This day they were joined by a small flotilla of armed mine-sweepers. They were now within the Arctic Circle, and the last grip of inland winter

they had left behind in England seemed, in retrospect, mild and playful. Some of the men were still sea-sick, but the sergeant would not let them lie in their bunks or sit about between decks.

"Fresh air'll do you good," he said. "You'll need to be fit for the job we've got to do."

"What is it, Sergeant? Is there any news yet?"

"You'll learn in good time."

Masts and ropes, davits and chains and canvas screens on the upper decks were now all shrouded in congealed sleet, and they had been told that in view of the bad weather the Commando would be excused shaving till the return to England. But Cluny declined the privilege for his men.

"Whatever sort of blackguards you may be, you'll go ashore looking like gentlemen."

They grumbled, but when they saw others with stubbled beards smearing their faces they were glad. They liked to consider themselves a sub-section apart, able to do anything any one else could do, and better, and a few things that others would not even attempt. Evan Morgan sometimes talked boastingly of the personal exploits he was going to perform against all the Nazis he came across, and then his undulating Welsh voice rose still higher and shriller and his eyes glistened; but that was Evan's way of screwing himself to the requisite pitch of nervous tension. Something primitive, remotely ancestral, distinguished him from the others. They had learned not to mock him when he fell into those braggart moods, for he was apt to turn violently and tiresomely quarrelsome. The Irish, already forgetful that North and South were not always of one mind, had taken possession of a saloon on the second deck, and spent their evenings there, talking and laughing and dancing to a fiddle. O'Donovan sometimes went along, but rather to watch than to join the tireless revelry. Most of his off-duty he spent with those he was to fight alongside: Sergeant Cluny and Corporal Gosdaile kept them busy, stripping and cleaning and assembling again from the scattered parts their rifles and Thompson guns, the Bren guns, and the two-inch mortar, priming their hand grenades, and answering over and over again variations of the same tactical questions.

"We'll cut out patriotism and the rest of that guff," he told them. "Maybe you're a lot of handsome heroes. Maybe you're going to earn medals and the country ought to be proud of you. I don't care. What I want to make sure of is your soldiering. You've learned a new trade and I want to see every man a master craftsman."

They were glad of his canny, low-temperature talk, for each man in the privacy of his own heart felt the aching suspense of doubt about himself, the small unacknowledged fear that when at last, amidst the reality of warfare, he had to do those things he had so long practised, he might be found inadequate. How was it possible for any one to know his own ultimate quality till it had been put to the test by enemy bullets, grenades and shells? Some fled from these uncomfortable speculations, seeking to weary their bodies by incessant activity so that, once in bed, they fell instantly asleep. Corporal Gosdaile, Evan Morgan, Harry Lomax, Chester Park and Arthur Binfield adopted this technique to tide them through the long slow period of waiting while the ship moved, under cloudy skies and ever-shortening daylight, northwards towards the Norwegian coast. The American was the last troubled of these: he had once got himself accidentally mixed up in a high-jacking hold-up on a State highway in Montana, and believed he was inoculated against the fear of flying metal. He was, besides, interested to the point of fascination in studying the conduct of his comrades, which he called "European psychology."

Other men found themselves at odd moments impelled to move away to the comparative solitude of an untenanted space on the deck, leaning on the rail, watching the dark seas rising towards them and falling away and then racing astern, while through their minds moved, vast and imponderable, over-aweing them, strange and novel conceptions: of their own death, perhaps soon to be accomplished; of pain and mutilation from wounds; of youth never valued till now its existence was about to be imperilled; of that taken-for-granted but ultimately incalculable quality, courage, which every other man but the solitary individual communing inexpertly with himself seemed to inherit as of right. These temporary introspectives also would find it

difficult, when they had climbed into their hammocks, to drop to sleep, though every weary muscle and nerve longed for the natural oblivion. Among them were Frank Fletcher, who repeated his prayers more earnestly every night and often blamed himself for not absorbing the full meaning of his impromptu phrases; Emmet O'Donovan; and more surprisingly Sergeant Cluny and Bobby Clough. Bobby was soft-hearted under his brash and hearty manner. For the first time his imagination awoke to the fact that as a soldier he would be called on to kill other men, and he felt squeamish about it, and ashamed of his squeamishness. He fought his way out of this inward dilemma by restating his political creed to himself in jargonised phrases remembered from the close-printed pages of Left Wing pamphlets.

Sergeant Cluny was worried because so many months had passed since he had been in battle. He was the only pre-war soldier in the sub-section—he had enlisted in a Territorial battalion of the Highland Light Infantry in 1936—and the only one who had seen action. The responsibility weighed on him. Vividly he began to remember the noise and distractions, the nervous shocks and exhaustions of the retreat to Dunkirk and the evacuation from the beaches, and to wonder if he would be equal to the demands of this approaching raid. He was trained for battle before the war began, and then, after being left to wait inactive through a long autumn and winter, he had been swept with his battalion, almost as helplessly as household dust before a broom, out of Northern France. The experience left him angry and resentful. His self-respect ever since had been clinging desperately to a core of hopefulness. Now he saw the opportunity to prove himself a good Scot, a good n.c.o., a son not unworthy of a father he could scarcely remember. The sergeant thought of the coming raid as a desperate personal hazard: if he failed to reach the measure he had set himself, he would die inwardly, like a worm-eaten apple rotting on the tree. He was determined not to fail, but till the raid was over he could not quite be sure of his own quality.

O'Donovan, nine years younger, sustained himself pleasantly on his own private legend, romantic, unreal, exalted, but in-

tensely vulnerable when, in moments of solitude, he became aware that he was very young, very inexperienced, and by temperament very different from the other commando men. The Irish, in particular, puzzled him. Their humour was jovial and their wit more robust than the Irish wit he had discovered in books. They were neither romantic nor thoughtful, and their incessant singing, disputation and dancing in their own saloon, while it attracted him for a few minutes every evening, overpowered his senses. They seemed determined never to let the air about them be quiet enough to permit thought. O'Donovan's self-confidence was partly built on a conception of himself as a young man privileged, through his inheritance of Irish blood, to be more sensitive, clever and creative than the English among whom he had been born and reared. He had never set foot in Ireland since two boyhood visits to an aunt living in Dunloghaire, near Dublin. These memories were already transformed and absorbed into his book-fed legend of a picturesque Ireland, and if the Irishmen in the Commando were so manifestly out of tune with it, then the whole legend was imperiled. If that failed him, on what inner resource could he draw for strength? He shuddered at the prospect and crept back, not quite so confidently, into his cocoon of romantic day-dreams.

Thus, each after his own nature, every man in the sub-section was at times subject to self-doubt. Yet because youth and temperament and convention forbade them to communicate these misgivings to one another, no man suspected that his troubles might be shared by his comrades. To each the others seemed carefree, capable, soldierly, physically and mentally, as well as by training, perfectly equipped for the venture in front of them all. Thus each man detected in the bearing of the others a standard after which he himself, at whatever cost, must strive. Except when, before they climbed into their hammocks at night, they fell to singing popular love songs, old and new, they were quite unsentimental, yet the feeling of comradeship between them grew stronger as the time for action approached, and each man was privately impelled to resolve that, despite his personal defects and secret fears, he would do nothing to let the others down. The sum of their individual imperfections knotted itself

tightly into a corporate determination far stronger than the additions and multiplications of logic. They were ribald and profane, confused in thought, and immature in their emotions, yet they were sustained by a faith, an allegiance which only occasionally expanded—and then in trite terms—to touch such wide abstracts as humanity, democracy, patriotism, and for the most part fastened itself to the Commando, and more particularly to their own sub-section. Every man looked to Sergeant Cluny, and he, dourly wrestling with his own mental travail, felt himself justified by these still untried soldiers of whom he thought more highly than he ever allowed them to guess.

CHAPTER 7

Looking Down on Torgsdal

THE next morning they were shown maps and photographs of Torgsdal, a small town at the head of a fiord in the far north of the Norwegian coastline. Then followed lectures with blackboard diagrams, and questions were invited and freely asked. The German military garrison was estimated at between four and five hundred men, gunners and technicians as well as infantry. A U-boat station, small but because of its location important, was being built on the shores of the fiord, and these docks, the store-sheds, the workshops and the oil stores had all to be destroyed: that was the main purpose of the raid. The navy and the R.A.F. were to take part. Bombing planes would put down a smoke-screen round the shore and behind the western part of the town—the fiord cut into the mountains almost due north and south. Other planes would bomb the nearest German airfield, two hundred miles away. The navy would sweep a passage clear of mines during the night and afterwards bombard or otherwise attack any U-boats, destroyers or smaller craft found at anchor.

The task of the Commando men was to effect a landing, overcome the resistance of the German garrison, and hold the town if necessary, as an improvised fortification while the demolitions were completed by sappers and seamen. The main landing would be made at dawn, which would be late: but an hour earlier one party was to be put ashore stealthily on the west side of the fiord, away from the town. This party, small to give a better chance of escaping detection, would climb the mountain-side to capture successively the radio station and and a storehouse where, it was believed, a reserve transmitting

set might be established. The success of the operation depended on this preliminary being carried out effectively and without rousing the rest of the garrison. Sergeant Cluny's sub-section were delighted to find they had been chosen for this. Captain Blanchard was appointed to lead them: his rank emphasized the importance of the task. A Signals sergeant and two men were attached to deal with the radio sets, and they would have a Norwegian guide. In addition, three sappers were to go with the rear guard, to tamp in the demolition charges when the objectives were captured, and afterwards to detonate the explosives.

The sub-section spent the afternoon alone, studying its own allocation of maps and photographs, discussing ways and means, routes and alternatives, till the plan was fixed to the last detail, and every man, including sappers, signallers and guide, rehearsed in it. In the evening, after deck exercise, the whole Commando was called together and addressed by the commanding officer. Then they dispersed to clean and prepare weapons for the last time, and turned into their hammocks early. That night, although the wind was officially described to them as half a gale and the incessant rolling of the ship increased in force and angle, they slept sounder than at any time since they came aboard. One or two who woke soon after midnight noticed that the ship was travelling more steadily and smoothly, but it was not till they were roused at five that they learned this was because they had already entered the fiord, where the mountains on either side kept off the wind and made smooth water in the narrow channel.

Because the ship moved so slowly and steadily, the men of the sub-section could walk comfortably along the iron-walled alleyways, glaringly lighted by unshaded electric lamps and swirling with hot air and greasy smells of oil and cooking, to collect in their mess-tins a breakfast of bacon, sausage and eggs, with a pint of boiling strong tea for each man. The forty-eight hour rations always carried for a raid were already packed in their kit. Ten minutes for a smoke, and then they were ordered to parade on the troop deck in full equipment, and to keep silence and show no lights. Below decks the heavy cold-weather

clothing made them sweat. Their faces, under the round caps of khaki wool, were flushed before they darkened them with grease and soot. Captain Blanchard was the only one who did not look unduly broad and heavy laden: he was indeed still elegant, for he wore a ski-ing suit of fine woven white cloth and on his head a scarlet bobsleigh cap with a tassel.

Once they had climbed two staircases and a steel ladder, the men were glad of the wool and leather muffling body and limbs, for the outer air, though there was no wind, at once clamped icily about them. Not a light was visible ashore or in the fiord as they assembled in the darkness. The screws were turning so slowly that the ship hardly seemed to move, and they all missed the shuddering throb of the engines transmitted along the iron decks and bulkheads. Gradually, as their eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, they were able to distinguish objects near at hand: railings and ventilating shafts; sailors moving to their duties; a derrick; three hooded heads silhouetted above the canvas windbreaker on the bridge; a coil of rope; cylindrical shapes chained near the bulwarks which might be either oil-drums or depth-charges, and the steel-sided assault craft in which they were to go ashore. For the first time they realised that the maps and photographs they had committed to memory would be of no more than elementary use to them: in this utter blackness they could move only slowly and uncertainly, and infinite incalculable hazards of mischance lay between them and the radio station on the still indiscernible hillside. Yet they longed to be ashore, feeling that land, any land, was their proper element for fighting. On these shadowed decks, treacherous with congealed sleet, they could not move an inch without feeling slow, clumsy, thwarted, almost stupefied despite their excitement.

At last the steel barge was slowly and carefully swung out over the side and lowered. One by one the men of the subsection followed down the steel ladder. Not till each had a foot on the last rope-bound rung above water could he, looking down, make out the seats waiting for him there, though repeated practice had taught him everything he had to expect and do. Frank Fletcher, who belonged to the mortar team, clanked the

barrel several times on the ladder as he went down and was cursed in a hoarse whisper by Sergeant Cluny when he stowed the mortar at last at his feet. Arthur Binfield and Harry Lomax brought down the shells. The sappers came last with their boxes of T.N.T. held daintily clear of the ladder in free hands; they descended like travelling salesmen carrying suitcases of valuable samples.

When Captain Blanchard was satisfied, the sailors fended off the barge from the ship's side, and the engine began its muffled throb. They were moving towards the shore, very slowly in order to make as little noise as possible. The ship was absorbed into the darkness behind them. As they sat side by side, occasionally whispering and longing to stamp feet and swing arms for warmth, they could see nothing but the stars shining overhead, bright but small, where clouds did not interfere, a remote and ineffective illumination. This density of darkness was at present their friend. There was still nothing for them to do but wait in patience. Only the naval officer and the Norwegian guide, whose helmeted heads showed dimly side by side above the armoured bridge, could see out of the barge. The rhythmic beat of the engine sounded loud in their ears; it seemed impossible that sentries ashore should not hear it and the garrison and the town be aroused. If that happened they would know soon enough, but meanwhile the barge thrust gently on through the darkness, and neither searchlight, gun nor even a shout of warning disturbed their passage.

When the engine was shut off and the barge, after drifting a few yards, thrust its blunt shallow bow on to shingle, Captain Blanchard lifted the guard from his watch and saw by the luminous hands that eight minutes had passed since they left the ship: they were well within the margin allowed them. The ramp was let down by oiled ratchets, and stiffly but as quietly as possible the men disembarked, splashed through water a few inches deep and moved forward on to the beach, where they lay down on the snow-covered pebbles in a well spaced semicircle. Chester Park and O'Donovan, with a Bren gun, were in the centre and furthest forward. In front and behind and on both flanks no lights showed, except that far away, behind the

beached barge, a few tiny lamps glowed and bobbed. That must be on the far side of the fiord, where the Tyn river entered between the town and the new docks; the sway and flicker of those pallid glowings marked them as the riding lights of vessels at anchor.

The men lying out on this western shore, a few yards away from the slow sibilance of the edge of the tide, could see now that the beach was very narrow and almost at once gave place to steep slopes of snow-covered hillside ascending into obscurity till, far overhead, the crest was marked obscurely by the recurrence of starshine. It was up there they had to climb to do their job. Across the romantic mind of Emmet O'Donovan there flitted the memory of Wastwater: substitute the salt sea of the fiord for the inland lake, intensify the cold, extend the snow from the summits down to the shores, and Torgsdal was almost identical, a narrow strip of water shut in by steep mountain walls. But in Westmorland they had slept by night and had seen Wastwater, a rocky cleft trapped in shadow, only by the clear light of day. Then they had been practising for war and had thought themselves fine fellows because they were young, athletic and enduring. In those days bullets and grenades and mines had been carefully directed near them, but not too near. Now an authentic enemy, still unsuspecting but well armed, skilful and resolute, was near at hand. The experience of war was at last to break upon them, and they must carry it to other men, without stint or pity. Very soon each of them would learn something new about himself, something fundamental, not to be proved except by this coming test. The little uncontrollable shudderings which played up and down his skin, on his back and from his knees to his thighs, O'Donovan ascribed to the cold. He would be all right the moment they got started. Every man lying on that frozen beach was silently and insistently forcing that same conclusion in his mind, while they waited for the guide and the sergeant to return from the preliminary reconnaissance.

Cluny came back at last, shadowing into ill-defined shape out of the darkness, and then word was passed by whispers to move off. The sub-section went in single file and in close

order, for fear of losing touch, each man holding the bayonet scabbard of the man in front. At first they moved on the level, their feet slipping on loose stones under the frozen snow. Then they began to climb upwards, diagonally across the slope. For a time they were on a path: two minutes later they had left it, ascending now at a steeper angle. The snow glimmered faintly under the far-off stars: it was deep but frozen solid underfoot. Occasionally they had to round a boulder projecting huge and angular out of the hillside. The air was fine, crisp, icy: their breath smoked out faintly in front of their eyes before it was lost in the darkness. Under their heavy clothing their bodies sweated, hot and sticky. They paused for a two-minute rest: that must mean they were near the radio station, but they could see no sign of a building or of other men, and the silence was suspended all around them, as crisp as the cold, as absolute as the dark.

They moved on and then, each following the silent precept of the man in front, began to crawl as they climbed. Presently they lay down and extended, swiftly and quietly, into a line. Straining their eyes forward they could make out, ten yards ahead, a belt of barbed wire, the intertangled strands dimly outlined against the snow. The radio station must lie beyond. The mortar team moved out towards the left flank. O'Donovan trained his Bren gun to fire through the wire. Still there was nothing to see or even to hear. Captain Blanchard with two men went ahead and began to wade across the wire. They lifted their feet high to trample the barbed strands down: it seemed to be a poor sort of obstacle, but if fire were opened on those three now advancing they would have little chance, and the others, still behind the wire, would have nothing to fire at except flashes from the German weapons. The captain and the Tommy-guns were lost to sight, and still no alarm was given. Another small party followed. Then Sergeant Cluny waved his hand and O'Donovan and Chester Park stood up and walked forward. They were half-way through the wire entanglement when a narrow rectangle of light showed directly in front of them: a door opening. The figure of a man was silhouetted against it for a second; another; and another. The light disappeared. The

three men had come out of the building, not gone into it. That meant they were Germans. That meant the surprise had failed, and at any second the raiders might be challenged and fired on. Shots would rouse the garrison in the town and the operator on duty at the radio set would send a message to his headquarters before they could get in to shoot him down and to cut the wires.

These realisations leaped in rapid succession into O'Donovan's mind, rebounding there frantically. He felt helpless, frustrated, for the belt of barbed wire was broad and sited at least fifty yards from where the door had momentarily opened. Then he heard voices in front of him, clear but without the peremptory clang of a challenge: the Germans were talking among themselves. Guided by the sound he was able to see them at last, three figures grouped closely together in the darkness. He stopped at once, but felt Chester Park's hand on his arm and the American's voice whispering urgently in his ear: "Keep moving, kid. They think we're their pals."

Once he got clear of the wire he could run in, with Park, and use his revolver. It crossed his mind, as he walked steadily on, the trodden barbs tearing at his trousers, that the Germans did not recognise them as British because they had discarded their steel helmets in favour of woollen caps. The Germans were nearer, larger, clearer to view now: it must seem to them that only other Germans would be plunging forward so trustfully through the wire. They had grown secure and over-confident in this snow-bound northern fortress, where nothing was to be feared but an occasional bombing raid and sabotage from native Norwegians. They could not believe that British soldiers were advancing upon them because they had no reason to think the British Army was nearer than eight hundred miles away.

As O'Donovan and Chester Park at last found their feet clear of wire, the three Germans paid, swiftly and almost silently, for their erroneous assumptions. While they stared at the two crossing the wire, some of the commando men already across had crawled up close. One German fell to the ground, probably tackled at the knees. Another was dragged down with a hand clapped across his mouth. As the third turned in alarm, his helmet was tipped forward on to his face, and a rubber cosh

beat violently on the top of his bare head, till he collapsed, stunned. There was a brief scuffle on the ground, and as O'Donovan, carrying the Bren gun by its handle at his left side and with his revolver drawn and cocked, came up, he saw Evan Morgan, Harry Lomax and Bobby Clough guarding the prisoners. The sub-section had brought off a surprise after all.

He swung left to the corner of the building, with Chester Park beside him. Their duty was to reconnoitre the outside and then hold the approaches. As they went they saw the door open again. Captain Blanchard and two men with tommy-guns went in, quick but stealthy. Then another: the Signals sergeant. The side of the building seemed deserted, a blank wall of stone. If there was a window in the wall it was well blacked-out and untraceable. Chester Park jumped in front of O'Donovan and went first as they tiptoed along beside the wall: he had a tommy-gun. At the next corner he stopped, to peer cautiously round. It was as well. A German sentry was coming towards them, walking briskly, keeping close to the wall. He was alert, this fellow, and held his rifle across the front of his body, his right hand behind the trigger. O'Donovan lowered the Bren gun carefully to the ground, gripped his revolver by the barrel, and then crouched beside the American, who put his tommy-gun down. It would be easy to kill, but safer to capture quietly. Everything they had to do was clearly planned in their minds, and they had rehearsed it often enough. As the German came up, Chester Park leaped at him, gripping with his right hand behind the knees and forcing the man backwards till he fell. At the same time he clasped his left hand, pushing forward with all his weight, over the trigger guard of the sentry's rifle, so that it could not be fired. O'Donovan, jumping round to the back, silenced the man's shout with a hand over his mouth, at the same time stunning him with a blow from the butt of his revolver.

"He's out," said Chester Park, as the German slid to the ground. "You made a real job of that." They left the man on the ground and, taking up the Bren and the tommy-gun, resumed their reconnaissance.

Almost at once, as he reached out his revolver hand to steady

himself against the wall, O'Donovan rubbed the knuckles against a long, narrow, tubular object—an insulating case for wires. He whispered to Park to wait, pulled out his knife, pressed it open, and with a jerk cut through wires and insulation.

"Might be a telephone," he said, "or leads for the radio. Better make sure in case they haven't found all the connections indoors."

They crept on right around the building, treading softly over the snow, without seeing or hearing any one else till they came to the front again. The stars seemed dimmer now and the blackness overhead had become a dark grey. The ridge line of the mountains enclosing the fiord could be faintly traced to the east, where they faced, but seawards, and below them, where the anchorage and the town lay, all was dark and obscure. They sprawled flat behind the Bren, directing it half-left, where they knew, though they could not see, the path uphill from the town emerged level with the building.

Sergeant Cluny came out and took their report. He ordered two other men away to watch the rear of the building.

"Is the job finished inside, Sarge?"

"Ay. We didna have to fire a shot. Most of the daft devils were asleep."

"How many?"

"Five. And three we got out there. And your sentry. That makes nine. It was too bloody easy. The sappers and the signallers are doing their stuff now. Clumsy swine! They cut the light off. Good job we had the prisoners locked up by that time, and the whole place searched. It's still pitch dark in there and we're using torches. The captain's playing hell about it."

O'Donovan and Chester Park looked at each other.

"It's near daybreak," said the American.

But O'Donovan confessed. "It's my fault, Sergeant. I found a lot of wires round at the back and cut 'em. Thought they might be the telephone or radio connections. Sorry."

"Sorry! By Christ, you ought to be sorry. You might have mucked everything up. You had no orders to cut wires, did you? And me and the captain calling the signal wallahs every name we could lay our tongues to."

The American intervened then. "Tell you what, Sarge. Get hold of one of the Signal guys quietly and bring him out here with a repair bag. He can fix it in a minute."

"Och ay, and apologise to the bleeder! Apologise! Me an infantry sergeant! Not likely. I got some tape and wire. I'll fix it myself. Where is it?"

They told him and, when they were alone together, Chester Park said: "What'd you do that for, kid?"

"Well, I thought it might have been the telephone."

"Not that. You were just unlucky over that. But owning up! You'll never get along in the Army or anywhere else, if you go spilling the beans every time that you make a mistake. Wait till they pin it on you. Wait till you're darnation sure they got it pinned on you. The sarge don't think any better of you for it, you know."

"I didn't imagine he would. I only thought the sooner they got the lights on in there the better."

He saw the American turn his head sideways as he lay, to look at him intently.

"O.K., kid. I wasn't ribbing you."

But O'Donovan was not mollified. He had acted for the best. No one understood him or appreciated him. It counted for nothing that by carrying straight on through the wire entanglement he had held the attention of the three early-rising Germans who might have given the alarm and brought the whole operation to disaster. Already he had forgotten that it was only at Chester Park's instigation he had not halted. Resentfully he blamed Sergeant Cluny, who would not pause to commend them for the neat way they had captured the sentry at the back of the building, who had only cursed him for cutting the wires, which, after all, was just such an act of individual initiative as they had been encouraged to try in all their training. If this was the way things went, it would be a damn long time before he exerted himself an inch beyond his strict orders!

The sergeant came back with the captured sentry, who was still nodding his head. He took him inside the building and as the door opened they saw, glancing back, that the lights were on again.

"I guess those signallers are wondering how it happened," said Chester Park, and laughed. Then: "Listen."

Close overhead they heard the roar of aircraft engines, and suddenly the wide-winged planes appeared, flying in not from the sea but over the mountain on which they lay.

"Ours!"

The bombers went on, circled, and dived towards the fiord. There was enough light now to watch them sweeping low over the shores, and at the same time, by ones and twos, rectangular window-panes were illuminated, throwing a golden radiance out on to the snow, so that the watchers could trace, far below them, not only the extent of the town, arranged round two or three wide streets at the head of the fiord, but the box-like shape of the houses, most of them with flat sloping roofs, snow covered, overhanging the walls. The spectacle had the charm, the prettiness, the miniature unreality of a display arranged in a shop window to please children at Christmas-time. At last O'Donovan realised where its fascination lay: not since the war began in the September of 1939 had they seen a town or village with lighted windows. It was additionally fascinating because it was a most unsuitable setting for battle.

"There goes the smoke-screen," said Chester Park, pointing to where the planes, flying low and slow, were leaving behind them along the shore a trail of smoke bombs which emitted clouds of black smoke. Then the silence was broken by repetitive ejaculations of noise, echoing from one mountain wall to another, and through the morning dusk they could see tracer ammunition speeding this way and that, up from the shore and the ships at anchor towards the planes, and out across the waters of the fiord, speeding, curving, yellow, green, blue, red. Three searchlights began to waver this way and that, at water level, illuminating in turn many ships, large and small.

"There go our assault boats. They're almost ashore already."

The steel barges were under fire, and as yet they had no targets to fire at. Orders were to give the Norwegian inhabitants time to find shelter.

Sergeant Cluny, standing behind them as they lay at the guns, said sharply: "Never mind the fireworks. Watch the approaches

up here. You two will stay behind with the Bren. All the prisoners are in a room under guard. There's two more of our chaps at the back—Binfield and Clough. The sappers are inside, getting ready to blow up the radio room. The signallers come with us."

Captain Blanchard sent up the success rocket. There was no reason to hold back now the alarm had been raised in the town, and the landing, deprived of complete surprise, was begun. But if there should be an alternative radio station in the other building along the hillside, and a crew to operate it, the subsection would probably be too late to prevent news going out to other German stations. All the attack squad could do was to hurry off with the mortar, the other Bren, the tommy-guns and hand grenades, and cross the intervening hill slopes as fast as possible.

The fiord was now full of noise and smoke and lights. Batteries on shore had opened fire, and the warships were firing back at the brief puffed-out white lights flashing from the gun muzzles. But the commando men were ashore. They ran up the beaches and disappeared into the smoke. One of the following assault craft was hit by a shell: the watchers on the hillside saw a sudden expansion of crimson flame between the steel ramps and then a man's body, tossed high, fell through the smoke into the sea. The barge began to drift sideways, till a speed-boat ran alongside. The warships had sunk two German patrol vessels, and picketboats were hurrying boarding parties to others. In the town itself Park and O'Donovan could trace the fighting from street to street, by the stutter and flash of tommy-guns and the crack of hand grenades. There were men lying motionless now, stretched on the snow, some of them gilded by the lamplight from uncurtained windows. Others were limping and crawling to take their wounds to shelter. Two, three, four buildings were on fire, the flames springing so rapidly from roof and walls that it was obvious they were timber-built. At that distance all the figures crouching beside walls, running in and out of houses, sprawling and kneeling or lying flat to fire, seemed tiny and far away. No voices floated up to the hillside out of all that reverberating confusion of noise, and it was difficult to think of the

fighting, dying and wounded men as human beings, still less as individuals and comrades known by sight and name and friendship. They were like agitated manikins enacting a spectacular but distant melodrama, a punch and judy show gone crazy with crowd scenes and fireworks.

No searchlights were working now, either because full daylight had arrived, or because they had been shot out, and there were fewer guns firing from the shore.

"I expect we've taken the batteries," said O'Donovan.

"Queer," said Chester Park, "I've hardly seen a Jerry so far."

"There's a bunch of prisoners down there close to that jetty. See 'em now? Hello! there goes a mortar."

They watched the shells rising high over the town and falling almost vertically, describing a monstrous hairpin course through the air till they fell round a larger building behind the church which, with its series of sloping roofs, resembled a Burmese pagoda oddly transported into a snowscape. At last a shell fell on to the roof and exploded inside, sending tiles and fragments of beams hurtling upwards. Then another. Firing continued from the building, but machine-guns began to spatter bullets through the windows, and a party of commando men, holding their tommy-guns close, emerged from a corner and ran for the doorway. The first paused to hurl a grenade; before it burst he was shot down. Another fell. The others pressed on and in through the door. They came out a minute later with a dozen prisoners, each holding his hands above his head.

"We're doing well. But Jerry knows what he's up to. He's fighting from inside the houses. Clever old bastard. Gives nothing away. What's that?"

They turned and watched a rocket hurtling high over their heads before it burst. They stood up and were now able to see clearly the other building, the reserve radio station, on the mountain-side, a mile or so to their right, with men in khaki standing outside. Captain Blanchard was smoking a cigarette: there was sunshine now to make the scarlet cap on his head look vivid against the snow. Sergeant Cluny waved to them. It seemed he was in a better temper by this time.

"I'd say they got that place without any trouble."

Evan Morgan, standing beside the sergeant, lifted his rifle high above his head, muzzle up.

"No enemy in sight! What does that blasted Welshman mean? "There's hundreds of Jerries down in the town, still fighting. Maybe he hasn't noticed yet? Maybe he thinks this is the real scrap, and what's going on down there is just a rodeo put on for his benefit?"

"I expect he means they found the place unoccupied. We have had an easy time up here, haven't we?"

"Too easy. We're missing all the fun and games. I guess it's pretty tough down below. A high old time in the old town to-night! Strikes me, this poor old sub-sec.'s been sidetracked."

CHAPTER 8

Tyn Ridge

THE sappers came out of the radio building behind them, bringing the disarmed prisoners. The Germans were unshaven, with dark beard stubble on pallid skins, and, whether, they wore greatcoats or only tunics, they shivered.

"Scruffy lot they look," said Chester Park. "Not much fight in them. Technicians, that's what they are. Not half as much guts as their pals down in the town."

The prisoners stared at their captors apprehensively, and suddenly O'Donovan began to laugh.

"I expect we look pretty tough to them. With our faces all blacked up."

"Not you, kid. You couldn't look tough if you tried."

"I did as much as you, anyhow, getting that sentry."

"I wonder which one it was?" Park inspected the prisoners and admitted: "I wouldn't know him again. Funny, you knock a guy down in the dark, and then in the daylight you can't tell him from Adam."

The sapper sergeant led out his detonating wires from a small drum, retreating down the hillside. He came back and said he was ready to blow up the radio set, but Chester Park told him he'd better wait till Captain Blanchard gave the word. The captain was now returning over the snow slopes with the rest of the sub-section.

But O'Donovan was looking the other way, towards the town and the head of the fiord.

"We're winning all right," he said. "Now you can see plenty of Jerries. There's a whole lot of them retreating."

Out from the top of the street which ended on the hillside

above the church and the largest of the burning buildings a scattered crowd of grey-clad Germans was hurrying away, climbing steadily up the mountain slope towards where a long, narrow ravine was scored out, from the crest to the plain, by a watercourse now frozen up. O'Donovan remembered the name of it—the Tyn river. It looked more like a brook.

"There's more than a hundred of them. Nearly two hundred, I'll bet. Is no one going after them?"

"They can't see, down in the town, the way we can. There's still plenty of scrapping going on, and mopping up."

"But those Jerries'll get away," exclaimed O'Donovan. "In a little bit they'll be under cover in that ravine. Look at those fir trees, higher up. There's lots of rocks, too. And if they get away, they'll bring help."

"I doubt that. But they might do some useful sniping from up there." Chester Park stared again. "I'd say those are mountain troops. What do they call 'em—Jägers?"

"Come on!" The boy spoke with abruptness and decision. Startled, the American looked at him.

"What's the idea? Those guys are too far away for us to get at them. Besides, the sarge told us to stay here."

O'Donovan gloomed: he had forgotten that he was already in Sergeant Cluny's bad books for exceeding his orders. But if he waited till the rest came up (they were not hurrying, for the sub-section's task was to hold both hillside radio stations till the town was captured) the opportunity would be gone. He had the elements of the situation clear in his mind: nearly a third of the German garrison escaping unobserved and only one route, along the top of the ridge enclosing the head of the fiord—he remembered it was marked Tyn Ridge on the map, in English—by which they could be cut off. If he waited he could not be held to blame. But if he and Park hurried off immediately, closing the range, and opened fire on those Germans climbing out of the valley, they might turn a partial success into a complete victory. For one protracted moment he knew that he was faced with a dilemma of moment not only to this Commando operation but to himself, to himself as an individual, a being unique, a spirit encased in the solitude of the flesh, for whom ultimately

there were no resources outside his own self-reliance. To vindicate that view of himself, he took the decision.

First he taunted the American. "I thought you wanted to get into this fight, not just watch it from the balcony seats?"

"You're mighty fresh, all of a sudden."

But Park was not looking for a row. Almost at once he added: "Maybe you're right, kid. Anyhow, we can only get killed or court-martialled. Come on."

But O'Donovan was taking all the decisions just then.

"Collect all the ammo. you can. There's more at the back. I'll take these magazines and the gun. You follow as fast as you can."

He told the sapper sergeant to report to Captain Blanchard what they were doing, and then set off at a run: It was a lung-tearing journey, uphill at first, then along the ridge, and always over snow-sliddery rough ground, till at last he could prop the Bren gun on its bipod and lie behind it, the ammunition spilled on the snow beside him.

The first of the escaping Germans was already within fifty yards of the fir trees, where the ravine deepened: the better part of a mile away. He had to fire across an arc of the mountain slopes looped round the fiord, and slightly downwards. He had to fire at once, to prevent the first Germans from entering the ravine. His breath was still coming fast, deep and painful; the foresight blurred on his eyes; and his mittened finger fumbled as he pushed it round the trigger. He fired a short burst and saw the snow kick up in tiny momentary spirts some yards beyond the men he aimed at. Too high and too wide! He adjusted the sights, and aimed again. The first man fell, tumbling and sprawling backwards over snow and frozen water and rocks. He hit another, and a third: then two together. He swung the gun to find fresh targets. Some of the Germans were swarming towards boulders now, to hide and protect themselves. He traversed the gun to shoot into the mass lower down, and hit a dozen before the magazine was expended. As he removed it and fitted another, he exulted in the power with which this chattering gun invested him. Most of the Germans had cover now, behind rocks and in tiny hollows, but there were still

groups at which he could aim and watch his fire kill and wound several at a time.

He became aware that they were firing back at him. A hundred—there must be more than a hundred of them left unhurt—to one! What did he care? Most of them were firing short. He fitted a third magazine. Chester Park came up beside him, breathless but urgent to take over the gun. He refused.

They dare not move now, those Germans. Most of them were sheltering behind rocks. He had to fire at a head, a shoulder, or a forearm. Even so, he achieved a number of hits. It was a wonderful gun, the Bren, and he was damned clever with it! Alone, he was holding up a hundred armed Germans, cutting off their easy retreat, turning the tide of battle.

"They've got a machine-gun going," said Chester Park, as he reloaded the magazines. We'd better move. We're in the open here."

"If I get knocked out, you can take over the gun."

But it was impossible that he should be hit! He was too clever for that. The Germans might put their bullets pretty close to him, but they'd never touch him. He had created this situation, and he was master of it.

Suddenly, twenty yards away on his right, he heard a noise that did not come from enemy bullets. He glanced across while Chester Park changed the magazine. Corporal Gosdaile had another Bren gun in action there. So they had taken up his idea? And now the Germans on the far hill were being fired on from below as well: the Commandos had followed them out of the town. Nor was that all, for when he saw shellbursts over the ravine he knew that the Navy also had followed his lead: a destroyer was firing uphill from the fiord.

The next moment Sergeant Cluny was stooping over him, his fingers on the white-painted carrying handle of the gun.

"You bloody young fool! Get into cover over there."

Furious, he rolled over and over, his arms at his sides, till he came to rest at the back of the boulder beside which the sergeant had re-erected the gun. The sergeant insisted on firing it himself, with Park loading, till the Germans began to wave white handkerchiefs tied to the barrels of their rifles. When the

firing stopped they stood up and walked downhill to surrender, leaving their weapons, their dead and their seriously wounded behind them. The sergeant kept the guns ready to fire and relaxed his attention only when commando men from the town began to climb up to bring in the wounded Germans and the abandoned weapons.

The moment he stood up, O'Donovan snapped at him: "So I'm a bloody fool, am I?"

"A bloody *young* fool, I said. Youth's your main trouble. You're green. You've no experience. And you won't live to get any if you expose yourself the way you were doing when I found you."

"I suppose you're going to crime me for disobeying orders? Leaving my post. It was my idea, you know. You can't blame any one else for it."

"Ay," said the sergeant, "there's that to be thought of. I'd crime you all right, only——"

"Only what?"

"Only the captain said it was a damn smart idea. He seems to think we'll make a soldier out of you yet."

The sergeant, who had never before unbent to any of them, grinned at him, and suddenly O'Donovan was aware that the others thought him a fine fellow, and esteemed him almost as highly as he esteemed himself.

The radio stations had been blown up now, so they set out downhill for the town, and before daylight faded after its brief visitation they had exchanged experiences with other commando men, seen prisoners and quislings herded into boats to be taken out to the ships, helped to put out fires, given cigarettes and chocolates to the townspeople, and stared at some of the prettier girls, cursing their luck because the interpreters had no time to waste in translating compliments and endearments. The Commando had lost fifty killed: the bodies were taken aboard the ships to be buried at sea. Theirs was the only sub-section without a casualty: they were a little ashamed of their good luck, though they pointed out that they had not only given the attack a first-class start but brought it to a successful conclusion.

It was just a pity that others had seen more close-quarter fighting.

There were still German dead lying in the streets, their pockets turned out by the Intelligence men. O'Donovan walked past them with a single, apparently casual glance. He lacked the curiosity which made some men examine corpses minutely. For him these dead Germans were evidence that he had not dreamed, that a real battle had taken place in which he had acquitted himself creditably, more than creditably. But when, turning a corner, he came on a procession of stretcher-bearers and saw the collars of grey-green tunics showing at the edge of the blankets, an impulse made him ask: "Where did those chaps come from? Bit late collecting them, aren't you?"

"Just got 'em in off the hillside. A hell of a way up they were too."

These were some of the Germans he had shot down from nearly a mile away! He looked at them. They were young, bleak-eyed, pallid. One shuddered visibly under the blankets at every deep breath he took. The next moaned perpetually; his eyeballs flashed white as they rolled from side to side. The third had a dressing over one side of his face which he had torn away from the scarlet wound, revealing an empty eye-socket, filled with blood and torn flesh and splintered bone. Saliva bubbled out between his pale lips. Suddenly the wounded head fell to one side. The stretcher-bearers put him down in the snow, bent over him, and then lifting him off, folded the stretcher. One of them shouldered it.

"What's the matter?" O'Donovan asked.

"The poor bastard's conked out, that's all. If they're dead we don't take 'em aboard. Got a light, mate?"

But O'Donovan turned abruptly away into an opening between the houses.

The stretcher-bearer stared after him.

"What's the matter? Bit too young for this caper, I suppose. He'll have to toughen up."

Chester Park held up his petrol lighter to the cigarette, shielding the flame.

"It's not that," he said. "He's the guy that knocked out these Jerries. And a whole lot more."

"Go on! Is he the chap that worked that Bren up on the top of the mountain? Nice bit of work, that was. Made all the difference."

"Yeah. All his own idea, too."

"Is that a fact? Rummy. Seemed to upset his stomach, seeing that Jerry conk out. Well, it takes some chaps that way. Don't do if you're on the stretchers, though. If I was to fret every time I see a stiff I'd never get anywhere."

The American hurried after O'Donovan.

"Feeling better now?"

The boy nodded. "Funny thing, all the time I was firing the Bren up there I never seemed to realise I was killing men. Don't think I'm soft. I know we've got to do it. I know why, too."

"Yeah. They'd have done it to us, if they'd got the chance. They certainly would. And no pangs of conscience afterwards. Say, kid, you ever seen any one dead before to-day?"

"No."

"That accounts for it. First time I ever saw a corpse I went off my food for a week. But don't worry. You can get used to anything in time."

Suddenly, the American kicked his friend's ankle, and they stood to attention as Captain Blanchard came up.

"Well done, both of you. I was watching you up there on Tyn Ridge. It will all go on my report."

They grinned at him with modest, soldierly restraint. But Chester Park said: "It was O'Donovan's idea, sir. And he got the gun into action. Wouldn't let me have a crack at all."

The captain thought it proper that this information, which he already possessed, should not come from O'Donovan himself. The boy was more intelligent than most. He had shown initiative. But it would be a good thing if he worked with an older, more experienced man like Park. It looked as if they had struck up a partnership. He fumbled for a few more words of commendation, and then hurried on.

"He's a good guy, the cap," Chester Park decided. "Guess he can't help the way he talks. Lad-di-dah, my fine fellows! It's the

way he was brought up, I suppose. And I wish he'd get rid of that sissy red hat of his."

But O'Donovan did not object to the bobsleigh cap. Wearing it enhanced Blanchard's family resemblance to his sister. If the captain told her about all that had happened to-day in Torgsdal, would he mention the Bren gun on the hillside? She might say: "O'Donovan? Oh, yes, I know him?" Or perhaps she would say: "That's the one I talked to on the train, just before you all went away."

Had he mentioned these speculations to Chester Park he would have been told that Blanchard was not likely to speak his name outside the Commando, and that Blanchard's sister had probably forgotten by now that she had ever accepted a cigarette and exchanged remarks with a trooper in her brother's regiment. But O'Donovan said nothing, and by the time the ship set sail again for home the hot impress of reality was already being smoothed out of his mind. As he lived the day over again in his private thoughts, all its events were transformed romantically. The other men considered he was behaving very well, having so little to say about his own part in the raid: but within himself Emmet O'Donovan was enacting a daydream drama in which he was both author, producer and leading actor, and the more often it was performed, the less it resembled the few bare hurried events it was based upon.

CHAPTER 9

Southward Bound

AFTERWARDS they led the life of gladiators. The tense excitements of combat were replaced by what in comparison seemed to them leisure, luxury, self-indulgence. It was true that the ship and its escorts were bombed towards the end of the first day of the homeward voyage, and later there were two U-boat alarms, with destroyers and corvettes dashing around in flutters of foam and leaving behind them the spectacular eruptions of depth charges. But the bombs fell wide, and they saw no torpedo trails at all. The voyage home settled into a diminuendo of anticlimax, for the commando men had little to do but discuss their personal experiences till they wearied of them. They visited the sick bay to talk to the less seriously wounded, and that protracted the exchange of reminiscences a little longer. They uncovered their heads to the cold wind when the dead were buried at sea, and those who had lost intimate friends set themselves doggedly to compose suitable letters of consolation to mothers and wives. These looked ingeniously relieved when at last the envelopes were addressed and sealed and ready for the post-box at the head of the saloon staircase.

For the rest, the men had few parades, they ate (all except the incurably seasick) heartily, and passed a lot of time till port was reached in singing, skylarking and the rough games which alone at that period could blunt the edge of their exuberance. The Commando had made some mistakes in the course of the raid: they had still a lot to learn about street fighting. This they were told in forthright words, but equally it was clear that authority on the whole was well pleased with them. And they felt they had reason to be pleased with themselves: with very few exceptions

each man could now consider the personal question of his own fitness to belong to the Commando answered decisively and filed away below the level of consciousness. They were returning without their dead and with more than a hundred wounded, with captured Germans (most of them in the cruiser and the destroyer), with a few quislings and many young men who had volunteered to join the Free Norwegian forces in Britain. There were other differences: it was not the same company of commando men that the ship carried back; the survivors had all been changed by the experience at Torgsdal. They knew it. Because they did not distrust the obvious and the platitudinous, they told each other, with sobering jubilation, that they had received their baptism of fire. But long before they were landed on the quayside of the same Scottish port from which they had set out they had grown accustomed to the transformation, and quietly clamped it into place over the other disregarded assumptions on which they based their unsystematised philosophy.

Newspaper reporters—who must not be spoken to except in the presence of a Security officer—press photographers, cheering civilians, men, women and children, were more than they had bargained for at their home-coming. They were flattered but abashed. Evan Morgan himself, who could boast as fluently as he sang, was heard to say: "All over in a few hours it was, and not a night's sleep lost;" while Sergeant Cluny, thankfully regaining his customary attitude of derision, addressed his subsection, as "blushing ersatz heroes" and reminded them that so far as they were concerned most of the raid had been a comfortably remote spectacle which they might just as well have witnessed "with your bums planked on plush seats at the pictures." Harry Lomax said if he was ever asked to sit on frozen snow at a cinema he'd have something to say about it. But generally the fussy applause from those who in one way or another had heard of their home-coming and turned out to cheer them made them feel shy and what Captain Blanchard called "slightly bogus." They were glad to get away and to sleep the night in a nearby camp. They believed they had earned a week's leave and they expected it at once.

Next morning, however, they were roused early and by nine o'clock they were on the road in their own transport trucks which had appeared during the night. Where they were going remained a secret except that they were told tersely, "South!" And south the trucks carried them, mile after mile, hour after hour, all day with only two brief halts for meals. Some of the men began to credit a rumour that the Germans had landed on the English coast and it would be their task to hurl the invaders out: they were ready for it. But there seemed to be no other troops moving in substantial numbers, and in the Scottish towns and villages as they hurtled through the people glanced up at them with friendly but casual curiosity. Nor was there any exceptional news in the papers they bought: a heavy air raid on "a Midland town," a food prosecution, patrol activity in the Middle East, and a shipping raid by Coastal Command. The first evening they had left Edinburgh behind when, during a halt, they saw the story of their exploit set out in the local evening papers. "Big Commando Raid on Norway," said the black headlines, and underneath, in type almost as large: "U-boat Base and Oil Stores Destroyed. German Garrison Routed. Many Prisoners Taken."

"Bit hard on the R.A.F. and the Navy," said Bobby Clough. "Any one'd think we did it all off our own bat."

However, in the reporters' accounts several shorter paragraphs were given to the air bombing and the laying of the smoke-screen, as well as to the escort and boarding work of the warships. In every truck of the southward-bound convoy there was a commando man reading aloud from a newspaper, despite the jolting, the dim light under the canvas awning, and the stream of comments and requests for repetitions from the listeners. They all felt a revival of excitement as they realised that they had become "front page news," that all over the free world people that night would be reading about what they had done a few days earlier, hundreds of miles away across the North Sea. Their fathers and mothers, their friends and relations, girls they were fond of and girls they wanted to impress would all be reading about the raid—unaware as yet that they had a personal association with it. The B.B.C. would be sure to

describe the raid, too, in the news bulletins. It would have been good to stop on the road and ask at houses for permission to listen; they would get a welcome all right, once people understood they were the chaps the announcer was going to talk about. All this made them feel important, a little larger than life, a little above normal. For the first time in their lives the attention of the general public had been focused on them, and they enjoyed it. Only Frank Fletcher, who was quite used to seeing his name in the Press, and to a lesser extent Corporal Gosdaile, whose fights had often been reported in the boxing columns of northern newspapers, took the new experience quite calmly.

It was the corporal who first pointed out that what the sub-section had done played only a brief and incidental part in the newspaper accounts. One reporter said, almost at the end, "The first landing was made in complete darkness by a small detachment which climbed the mountainside to put two radio stations out of action;" and the other merely listed "a radio station" among the installations destroyed. They felt aggrieved, and Harry Lomax complained: "Why don't they put in something about what O'Donovan done with the Bren? That's important, isn't it? That ought to be in, anyhow."

This was also O'Donovan's opinion. He could, had not modesty forbade, have supplied the reporters with appropriate descriptive phrases: "a tall young Irishman with black hair and Celtic blue eyes" would have looked very well in print. They read the newspaper through once again, front and back page, but all that they found about the sub-section's share in the raid only fed their resentment. It was a single sentence, hitherto overlooked: "Some of the German garrison tried to escape by climbing a ravine leading into the mountains, but a few accurately aimed shells from a destroyer induced them to turn back and surrender." the sub-section concluded that it was all a bloody shame. O'Donovan, however, was sustained by the feeling that his own sense of injustice, which he was careful not to express, had been corroborated by his comrades.

"Next raid we make," exclaimed Chester Park, "I'm going to talk to these Press guys, and give 'em the real low-down."

"Not without me present," the sergeant told him. "You all talk too much. Half a day's fighting, if you can call it fighting, and you want to blether about it for the rest of your lives. Go to sleep now, the lot of you. Except the duty man, of course."

All through the night they travelled along the main road south, dozing uncomfortably on the wooden floor of the truck, their shoulders propped against the jolting sides. For three hours the convoy had to move slowly, without headlights, feeling their way from village to village, while searchlights scissored restlessly about the dark sky, and over certain areas the anti-aircraft shells burst high, fiery, noisy, evanescent. Unseen bombers dropped high-explosive bombs into the towns while scatterings of fire bombs illuminated houses and factories and church steeples. Several times the trucks got entangled with fire engines and ambulances, and once they were diverted to a side road on the outskirts of a city which looked to have its centre on fire, though the steel-helmeted policemen declared it was only a medium-sized raid that was going on. But of this the commando men knew nothing, except when it fell to their turn to take lookout duty at the anti-aircraft machine-guns mounted on the trucks. Air raids became their business only when they had a camp or bivouac or billet to look after: at present they were on the move to an unknown destination. They slept, without ease or comfort, but as soundly as they could.

Soon after dawn they drew in to a camp of wooden huts, and, asking its location, learned they were in Northumberland. The morning was frosty and dark, and they were glad of the breakfast provided for them, though they had to hurry in order to leave the tables clear for the artillerymen stationed in the camp. They shaved and washed in cold water, and were then ordered back to their trucks.

"Lumme, how far are we going?"

No one knew, or at least no one would tell them. Corporal Gosdaile began to recognise the countryside, and was disappointed when they crossed the Tyne at Corbridge and did not turn east towards Newcastle. The morning was still bitter with frost—"a bit parky" Harry Lomax called it—when they went on mile after mile over the bare uplands of Durham and into York-

shire, which they met with first in the smoke and grime of Darlington. But soon after eleven sunlight broke clear and warm overhead. By noon it was hot enough to roll back the canvas awnings from the top of the trucks. To take them through the middle of the day they had haversack rations and filled water-bottles, and the trucks never stopped, except to cool the engines, all the long way through Yorkshire, sometimes picking a way in and out of stone-built mill towns, but more often over high rolling moors and wide dales, dipping to cross the rivers, climbing again to the next spread-out ridge. They were going south down the eastern flank of the great Pennine, the rocky spine of northern England, sprawled in bluish hillcrests along the horizon, and they became aware that, freed from the hard earth and bone-aching mists of Scotland, they had overtaken the spring. "To think we was shivering at Torgsdal a few days back," they said. Now some men were sitting in shirt sleeves, their mouths parched with road dust and heat; others had opened tunic and shirt collars. Their muscles eased, and the sweat flowing naturally out of their pores dried in the wind raised by the trucks' progress: it felt quite different from the sweat raised by hard uphill toil under the swaddling constrictions of arctic clothing.

There were a few tilled fields on their route, and those still showed the plough furrows bare of wheat blades or root-crops, but lambs and calves trotted on thin legs in the pastures where the grass was wakening out of its winter drabness. The oaks were still unleafed, wintry cadavers of dry, twisted wood springing out of the moist earth, stubborn and distrustful of this first heat of the turning year; but where there were hedgerows they were thickened with green, and sometimes among the hawthorns and privets as they rocketed past, the men would see blackthorn bushes studded with tiny blossoms of pale white, brambles with a bluish tinge on the petals, and on the banks of the ditches, if the trucks slowed up, primroses were to be seen nestling in wet moss and, another and intenser yellow, daffodils. "It's spring all right," they told each other. On the uplands the green had scarcely begun to triumph over the frost-bleached tawnniness of winter, but down in the valleys cottage gardens

had tulip beds in bloom, and in the coppices there were blue-bells, still dark in the bud, under beech trees whose small unfolding leaves of translucent green hung like dispersions of sea-spray in the sunshine, motionless and resplendent. Bobby Clough exclaimed when he saw in some of these woods tall trees seemingly without a leaf but decked on every upward-reaching branch with blossom whiter and larger and more vivid than the blackthorn bushes. Town-bred, he would not at first believe they were not foreign trees transplanted, and when Arthur Binfield told him these were cherries, and O'Donovan quoted poetry, Housman's "Loveliest of trees," he said: "I always thought they grew in orchards and gardens." When he was assured that wild cherries were too sour to eat, he felt a little comforted: he had not missed so much, among Manchester brick and smoke, as at first he had feared.

In the afternoon they left the main road and had to stop more frequently while the head of the convoy identified the route. Now they were moving west as well as south. The countryside was flatter, with more hedges and lanes, and flood water still lying in hollows and along canal banks. Dusk fell, the air swiftly growing colder, as they slid past industrial Midland towns, soiled with factory chimneys and slag heaps and rows of little houses built of brick the colour of canned salmon. It was dark night before, after climbing between round-shouldered chalk hills, the trucks brought them into a river valley and eventually to a succession of three villages. Here billets secured by the advance party awaited them. As they tumbled out on to dark road-sides they heard the expanding, persistent drone of heavy aircraft passing overhead. But no searchlights or flak shot up, and when they had listened in vain for the thin screech of nightfighters, they said: "Must be our chaps going out." They wished the unseen airmen luck as, stiff and tired, they stumbled away to make the acquaintance of new landladies.

"So you ought," said Sergeant Cluny.

"So we ought what?"

"Wish them chaps luck. They're doing something. Three and four nights a week. That's real raiding now. Not once in three months, like us."

"Well, we can't go unless we're sent."

"Besides, those R.A.F. blokes don't have to sweat. Do their fighting in an armchair."

"Proper fat they get, some of them," Evan Morgan said.

"Still, I'd rather it was them than me. All very nice, sitting up in the sky in your armchair—till you get kicked out, arseways."

"I don't know. Sometimes I think I'd like to be a pilot."

For once they were too tired to start an argument.

It was not till the next afternoon, after they were dismissed from parade, that they began to realise to what a different countryside they had come. In a few days they had passed through four climatic belts, from snow and ice in Norway to bleak lingering winter in Scotland, and then by way of a tentative spring, a slow reluctant unclasping of winter-bound earth in the North and Midlands, to the lushness of this sleepy river valley in the South. Their billets were strung out at village intervals along a road connecting two small market towns built round old arched bridges of grey stone over placid rivers—two different rivers which joined stream close to the village where Sergeant Cluny's sub-section was stationed. On the east and the north, and again to the west beyond the rivers, mildly rolling hills overlooked the valley, patched with woodlands of oak and chestnut, beech and pine. All the lower slopes were rich pasture or large tidy fields where the wheat and barley already stood inches high, brilliantly green against the chocolate-brown earth interspersed with white, for not far under the soil the hills were chalk: it showed in the lanes and in occasional pits cut sharp and deep into the hillsides.

Down in the wide valley the sun was trapped for the second part of the day: it lingered in a golden haze gilding the hedges where already the hawthorn blossom, hardly in bud a little farther north was full-blown, creamy and fragrant, and wild roses spread their petals wide. Every tree here was in leaf, poplar, beech, alder, elm and ash, lime and even the oaks. Buttercups stood tall among the meadow grasses, and the orchards behind the larger houses of the village uplifted blossom clouds, white for pear, plum and cherry, pink for apple, against the clear sky. The lilac had still to unfold, blue or white, and

the laburnum and magnolias and clematis, but round the cottage windows and overhanging high stone walls the rambling roses were already in bloom. Corporal Gosdaile and Bobby Clough and others northern bred could not admit that this was spring; for them it was the full majesty of a summer such as they rarely knew. And when they wandered off the road towards the river banks, exploring for ways to cross the backwaters among meadows where the grass was knee-high and the pollarded willows rooted into the banks were thick with blue-grey foliage, they came across bright-painted house-boats and caravans and miniature Swiss-type chalets; there were skiffs and punts and canoes moored, and water-hens guarding their chicks among the tall reeds and bullrushes. They felt the heat and the luxuriance to be almost tropical. They liked it, for the contrast, but it did not seem to them quite English.

Arthur Binfield, however, knew that he was not far from his home in Reading, and Harry Lomax had discovered that an hour's train journey, or a little longer if he got a lift on the road, would take him into London. These were both content without reservation. The others thought life might be too quiet here: they strolled round the village, the little there was of it, talking to the girls let out of the few shops now closed for the day, thought some of the pubs looked expensive, and asked how far they would have to go to the nearest cinema. The girls had a strange accent, resonant and rich in the vowel sounds, turning "i" into "oi," deep in the throat, an accent like Arthur Binfield's. The girls were impressed by the Commando lettering on the tunics of the newly arrived soldiers. When they asked questions and learned that these were the men who had raided Norway they were at first incredulous and then delighted. They made appointments rapidly, each afraid that some other girl would forestall her if she played for time.

The men settled on one small, old, unpretentious public-house at the cross-roads as their own. The beer was drinkable by war-time standards. There were no fancy ornamental lights in the bar, and no customers with coloured shirts and suède shoes and high-faluting accents. It was obviously and automatically "the local." When they came out at closing time they strolled

along the road for a few minutes before turning into their billets, discussing the girls and the beer and the weather. They strolled beyond the village and in the clear dusk they could see on the hillside rising from the road a big house, fronted by close-cropped lawns: it had stuccoed pillars along the front and all the stucco was painted white.

"I'll bet that belongs to the squire."

Without formulating the thought, they had realised they had come into a country of "residential properties," where gentlemen farmed by proxy and kept woods for the rearing of pheasants, where since Norman times power had retired to relax at ease upon its own private ground, where feudal privileges, slowly disintegrating, had been taken over and refurbished by modern industrialists and financiers.

One man expressed the opinion that such an imposing mansion must belong to a duke at least.

Bobby Clough could make a better guess than that. "A stockbroker, more likely. Dukes live in Park Lane, or else in deer forests."

But Chester Park had precise information. "It's eighteenth century. Like what we call Colonial style back home. Before that, there was a Tudor building, destroyed by fire. It's belonged to the same family since Queen Anne was alive. Name of Scope. It's called the Manor House."

CHAPTER 10

No Answers in the Mirror

WHEN she arrived at Paddington to catch the 6.13, Carol Blanchard had to wait in a long queue to get her ticket. She pushed her way through a jostle of business men, soldiers, sailors and airmen going on leave or returning, thronging round the bookstalls, cigarette kiosks and refreshment rooms. She passed Poles in softened lancer caps, Czechs and Free French, Norwegians, Belgians, Dutch, Indians with khaki turbans and Indians with long black greased hair, Canadians, South Africans, Australians and New Zealanders. There were also many women in uniform in the crowd: W.A.A.F. and A.T.S., and W.R.N.S. with their absurdly antiquated hats, eighteenth-century tricorne for the officers and child's seaside caps of the Edwardian era for the girls in the ranks.

In her suitcases she had an evening gown, two frocks and a coat and skirt. She had given the cases to a porter, sending him ahead to find a seat. She was still wearing her uniform, however, one of the expensive trim uniforms cut from light-weight khaki cloth which her brother's tailor in Sackville Street had made for her. She would change as soon as she arrived at the Manor House. Meanwhile, the sight of other girls in uniform induced in her, as always when she was not actually on duty, a submerged feeling of guilt. They had surrendered their whole lives to the war: she, belonging to an organisation administered from Mayfair and large country houses, did her war-work very much on her own terms. She drove important people, nearly always elderly men, very often distinguished visitors from abroad, round and about London. Sometimes she made long train journeys across country (putting on her uniform only when she

had to, after she arrived) and spent a few days conferring with titled ladies in provincial towns, arranging matters which Headquarters evidently believed to be important, though she was herself oppressed by their triviality. That was how she had come to meet David on the Scottish express. Having a brother in the Commandos was one of the vicarious justifications for her existence in this arduous world at war. He backed up her mother in telling her she was doing enough to satisfy her conscience. She was fond of David, and he was fond of her, though his intense affection went to their mother: he was insistent that she should keep her job in London so that she could see Mrs. Blanchard, who had moved to a cottage near Ascot, every week. "It's your duty," David said. "Mother's getting old, and she's alone in the world except for us. Besides, no one can say it's a picnic, being in London these days." That was true, though, now spring was here, no doubt the bombing would ease off. Nevertheless Carol felt that other girls of her own age who had joined more authentic Services might well look on her uniform with contempt.

Though the daylight still held outside, it was dark already in the station. The shattered glass of the roof seemed to admit very little light. As she made her way to the platform, she noticed that, under canvas awnings, the bomb damage to the hotel and the offices was being tidied up and repaired. The porter was waiting for her near the front of the train.

"Sorry, miss. No seats left," he said. "It's always like this now. I've put your bags on the rack there, but you'll have to stand. There'll be a lot get out at Maidenhead. I expect you'll get a seat then."

She tipped him and walked through the packed compartment to stand in the corridor. The lights were dim: screened as they were, they never attained their full intensity till the train was under way. She could scarcely distinguish the faces of the people sitting on the two seats, silent and tired, clutching umbrellas, evening newspapers and shopping bags. The Reading train moved out from the next platform. A minute or two later her own train started with a jerk. Inside the compartment behind her, two men took out gold watches to check the punctu-

ality of its departure; obviously they had done this five evenings a week for long years, and a war was not sufficient to alter their habits. Once upon a time they would have been ashamed to keep their seats while a woman stood, but now they were old, tired, irritable, worn with cares: the comfort of a seat was precious and belonged to those who took the precaution of arriving early. Yet possibly, in their secret hearts, they were ashamed to allow a woman in uniform to stand in the corridor, even as she herself was privately ashamed because she considered her uniform misleading.

A Guards officer two compartments away watched for a few moments, seemed to decide that she was a lady, and asked her to take his seat. She refused. She had to refuse three times. Then an older man, a civilian—she could not see his face distinctly in the shadows of the corridor, but he was neatly and soberly dressed, rather the sort of man she was accustomed to drive about London—slid back the compartment door beside her.

"I do wish you'd sit down," he said. "Not because you're a woman. But I expect you're tired, and I'm not."

Again this accursed uniform, making people think she was wearing herself out in dauntless efforts to win the war! She refused again.

He did not importune her, but she was puzzled when he said: "I begin to think you like standing in trains, Miss Blanchard. It is Miss Blanchard, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm awfully sorry. I didn't recognise you. In fact, even now I'm not sure——"

The man laughed. She could not see him at all as, the train passing through Ealing Broadway station, the unlighted corridor was completely darkened by overhanging roofs.

"We haven't met. I know your name because I came across your brother once. And the week before last I saw you with him on the Scottish express. You were in the corridor then. I was going to Carlisle. I expect you're going to meet him again now."

"You seem to know everything."

"No. But I'm spending the week-end with Sir Basil Scope,

and I gathered your brother was to be a guest as well. So when I saw you just now——”

She did not remember any civilian in the train to Scotland. She remembered losing her seat, when she went to look for David at Kendal, and being too proud to claim it again. She remembered the corridor being packed with soldiers, David's Commando men. She remembered a corporal who had been too friendly, and a boy with dark hair she had thought . . . what had she thought about him? Just that he was very nice. But she did not remember this man, whose name, it seemed, was Alexander Brind. She learned that he was a journalist. She was surprised that a journalist should have the manners of a gentleman. She liked him, and she was glad he was to be a member of the house-party. Gerald Scope would be there, and she had not made up her mind about Gerald. Her mother and her brother would leave her alone with him, if they got a chance. So would Sir Basil and Lady Scope. That was why she had been asked. She was not deceived about that. Sometimes she liked Gerald. Sometimes he perplexed her. Sometimes she pitied him. Sometimes she despised him, and was sorry afterwards. She did not very much want to be left alone in his company, by tactful design of their two families. Not yet, at any rate. Not till she understood herself better. This Mr. Brind might be interesting. She remembered seeing his name at the head of newspaper articles, which made him a kind of celebrity. He must have a lot of experience. He was old, and safe. If she could persuade him that she was not just a shallow, empty-headed girl, he might talk to her—and then she might have him at hand when the danger of being left with Gerald Scope confronted her.

At Taplow there were seats vacant, and they both moved into the compartment. Porters came along the platform, shouting for blinds to be drawn. They completed the journey in the black-out, and were driven to the Manor House in Sir Basil's limousine.

The first evening of the week-end brought no perturbations for Carol. Ever since she had been a schoolgirl with holidays three times a year from her school at Bath, she had been visiting here: the servants still called her Miss Carol and always seemed

a little surprised, and secretly amused, that she should be wearing grown-up clothes. The game-keepers and the cottage families of the labourers who worked on the Manor Farm could recognise her two or three fields away. It was her brother they hero-worshipped, of course, next to Gerald, the only son, the heir to the baronetcy and the estate. Possibly—and, in Carol's opinion, quite understandably—they preferred David. Gerald wanted things, secretly, yearningly, while David took them. David was poor, very poor compared with Gerald, but he had the grace and the self-containment, and the touch of wildness, which charmed affection and admiration from other people. To the Manor House servants, she herself was a little lower in status, as a female, a younger sister. But the truth was the whole Blanchard family, widowed mother, son and daughter, came on their frequent visits to the Manor House under an aura of friendship faintly tinged with compassion. Carol resented it. David seemed hardly to be aware.

Sir Basil Scope was a man of lineage, the seventh baronet in a descent fairly direct and unflawed as aristocratic descents go, for only once had an Act of Parliament been necessary to secure the continuance of the title, through a daughter, already married, whose husband was only too anxious to change his name. Sir Basil, however, was the son of a plebeian mother, offspring of a self-made business man, a ship's-chandler in Liverpool who had gathered a fortune in the heady days of mid-nineteenth-century commerce, concluding hard-headed deals with hard-headed shipowners, and promptly investing the profits from marine furniture and provisions in rows of cheap little yellow or red brick houses rented to the working population of Liverpool. Sir Basil's mother died when he was a baby, which event was regarded as providential by all the relations and connections of the Scope family who respected her father's wealth but envied her beauty and winced at the provinciality of her manners, accent and outlook. Sir Basil, when he came of age (in the same year that Edward VII belatedly ascended the throne), had inherited part of the ship's-chandler's fortune secured to him under his father's marriage settlement. This was sorely needed for the upkeep and renovation of the Manor

House: the town house in Curzon Street had been let to a South African millionaire who was reported to sully its austere and ill-lighted period atmosphere with orgies attended by book-makers and ladies of the chorus, proceedings tolerated by the ageing aunts of the Scope family only because of the tremendous rental which the South African millionaire, apparently secure on an economic bed of diamond mines, had carelessly engaged himself to pay for ten consecutive years.

The new baronet, it was considered in 1901, could now live, not lavishly, but in decent quiet and comfort upon the estate of his forefather's, and with care need not lose more than a few hundreds a year. On such a small deficit illustrious families had been known to flourish for generations. Sir Basil, however, inherited business acumen and enterprise, as well as money, from the deceased ship's-chandler. He first speculated cautiously, and under advice, on the Stock Exchange, and met with some success. Encouraged by this, he resigned his commission in the Guards and, after refusing several offers of company directorships for which, he knew, only his name, title and acquiescence were required, he put five thousand pounds into a new small advertising agency on condition that he was allowed an active share in the business. The smart young man who had founded the agency consented reluctantly, but was afterwards delighted to find that Sir Basil could not only introduce him to important business men but had no old-fashioned prejudices against new ideas in publicity. Those new ideas had changed repeatedly in the three decades since the partnership began: the smart young man had become bald and slightly pompous, but the agency flourished, and both he and Sir Basil knew that other smart, but not quite so smart, young men could always be hired, with the very latest ideas effervescing in their heads, for anything from £500 to, at a pinch, £2000 a year.

Sir Basil had done very well out of the advertising agency. He was also, by the spring of 1941, a director of one London daily newspaper, three provincial evening papers, a group of illustrated magazines for women, and a weekly review. which never paid its way but was very useful for airing political ideas and obtaining reactions in those influential circles where respon-

sible men discuss the near future responsibly and sometimes to their own advantage. The collapse of France in the summer of 1940, together with other impending and obviously inevitable military disasters, income tax at 10s. in the £, and the vast increase of surtax and excess profits duty, had brought Sir Basil rapidly down from affluence to anxious monthly budgetings. He could allow himself, in his personal life, wine, spirits, cigars and such restricted delicacies at meal-times as the best hotels and clubs in war-time London afforded. But his total income was now a little less than £5000 a year. There was nothing to save out of that, so that he could hardly regard the bomb damage to his town house, closed down in 1939, as a hardship; but many expenditures which he had considered a normal obligation on himself had to be cut out. He lived simply, almost as simply as in his schooldays, and declared himself a philosopher. The war would not last for ever; the Press would sooner or later spread its lucrative wings again; and meanwhile his capital remained pretty well intact, if dormant. The country would survive and he expected himself and his holdings to survive with it.

In one regard he accounted himself, in the circumstances, fortunate: he had only one child, a son who, not yet married at thirty-two, needed practically no subsidising. The war, moreover, transformed Gerald Scope's physical disability into an asset. Yachting at Biarritz during a long vacation, the end of his second year at Magdalen, the boy met with an accident which left him permanently crippled: nothing unsightly, nothing noticeable, or even, once the wound was healed, painful; but he felt it as an ignominious handicap. In a minor collision with another yacht, clumsily handled, just outside the harbour where a swell rose, Gerald had been knocked overboard; when he was picked out of the sea, half drowned, nearly helpless, it was found that the muscles of his right side, under the armpit and behind the shoulder-blade, had been badly torn. No one, Gerald least of all, could say what caused the injury: it was assumed that he was thrown against a projecting iron or a rail broken by the collision. When he left hospital, he was unable to raise his right arm as high as his shoulder. That meant no more cricket or tennis or squash or football. Not even golf. He could

not shoot over his father's coverts. He could not ski or row or fish. He was debarred from all active sports.

When the war began, in 1939, Gerald Scope was unable to join any of the Services. He saw his friends in khaki or in naval or air-force blue, and believed everyone despised him for still wearing civilian clothes. After Dunkirk, his lot improved. Because he had spent several years first learning the routine of newspaper offices and later as a director of Sir Basil's agency, he was able to obtain a post as public relations officer at an R.A.F. station in the West of England. Sir Basil was delighted to see his son in uniform: he would have preferred it to be Guards' khaki, but the Air Ministry responded first to Gerald's importunities. The young man was happy, though apt to be sensitive if he imagined any one glanced at his tunic to note the absence of wings and medal-ribbons. He sometimes argued that his post was civilian and his work could be done just as well in a lounge suit. But his father told him, proudly corrective, that he was performing valuable duties for the war effort—and secretly was delighted that his son should be kept out of London and other large cities where any night the blast or splinters of a German bomb might bring the succession to the Scope baronetcy to an untimely end.

All these facts were familiar to Carol Blanchard; they had been casually absorbed at intervals over a period of years, but never fully examined till now, when she believed herself to be face to face with a highly personal problem in which they were intimately involved. She felt great sympathy with Gerald, and was moved when she understood intuitively his misgivings about the uniform he wore. That was a bond between them. But Gerald was doing all he could, far more than many another man would consider legitimate or necessary: she herself was floating comfortably through the war, inert, a passenger, decorative perhaps for those who liked her style of beauty, but—she did not deceive herself—hardly useful. Her conscience twinged. Another bond between her and Gerald (but would it bear the strain that two families conspired to put upon it?) was familiarity, an old-established ease of intimacy, going back to their childhood. Or was that more barrier than bond?

Warmed and soothed by a hot bath (the provision of comfort at the Manor House never failed), sitting in her white satin evening frock, with a wrap over her shoulders, in front of the triple mirror of the dressing-table, Carol appreciated her surroundings. All her life she had been poor: not poor, as she reminded herself occasionally, in the way people were poor who went short of food or warmth or clothes, who lived dingily and anxiously from week to week, but poor by comparison with most of her friends: genteel poor. Sometimes, laughing and inwardly wry, she referred to herself as a distressed gentlewoman. As far back as she could remember, invitations had played a big part in her life, invitations to parties, to the theatre, to dances, to stay with other girls during school holidays, to weekend at country houses, to make up a party for Switzerland or the Riviera. She could count herself lucky that people liked her, men and women, old and young. But popularity, she thought now, once you were aware of it, was a temptation to insincerity. Not blatant insincerity: a kind of professional sincerity rather, an unconscious habit of making people fond of her, even if she did not like them very much. And after a time she began to wonder where it was all leading to.

This was where it was leading to—the Manor House and a proposal of marriage from Gerald Scope. The fairy-tale destiny traditional for a poor girl of good family peeped out of her mother's watchfulness, Sir Basil's benignance, Lady Scope's approving glances, Gerald's nervousness. Most young men liked to be with her, but those who had no money quickly realised that she was in the same case. Some of them would try their luck for an irresponsible love affair with her, and swear or laugh when they failed. Others put themselves on an easy footing from the first, regarding her as a comrade in distress. The only men who had paid her serious attentions were rather older, successful, prepared to settle down, looking round cautiously, without haste, for a suitable wife. Carol remained unstirred, and knew that her mother thought her "sensible" and "clever" when she was merely responding to her own temperament. Ambitious youngsters passed her by: for them she was merely part of the background of an early stage of their careers. In ten years' time

they would wed some débutante at present sitting in a fourth-form classroom. Meanwhile, they were polite to Carol Blanchard because, if she should make a successful marriage and acquire an influential husband, she might later on be useful to them. As for young men with money, they were mostly vain and spoiled: they had too many wealthy girls running after them to waste time on one who, they knew perfectly well, was an habitual guest. Gerald Scope was the exception.

Gerald would inherit not only his father's fortune, but the title, the Manor House and its estate, the house in Mayfair—and the advertising agency, the source of future wealth. Gerald need look for no other qualities in his bride than beauty and charm. Gerald, ten years her senior, had been kind to her even when, an undergraduate and a little later a young man with a job in London and lots of friends, he might have been expected to ignore a leggy schoolgirl. Gerald was shy, locked up in his own shyness. As far back as she could remember, she had had the trick of putting him at ease, though it was only now she realised this. The time had come when he wanted to marry her. No one, not even her mother, had said that in so many words. But Gerald's respectful, deliberate desire had long been accumulating impalpably about her, affecting her through his parents, through her mother, through her brother, David, through people they both knew. Here at the Manor House, the moment she arrived for this week-end visit, she could feel the air charged electrically with this new prospect: a larger, more secure, more gracious future which everyone, down to the servants (who looked at her sideways, smiling to themselves, more intimately yet more obsequiously than ever before), assumed she would welcome. Every one took it for granted she would "jump at" Gerald's proposal when it came. Every one except herself. And, yes, except Gerald. He would not take it for granted. With all that backing of wealth and privilege, he still would not assume her consent. His diffidence, his avoidance of self-satisfaction, probably sprang from his injury. He was morbid about it. Nevertheless his modesty, whatever its origin, consoled her. It gave her value in her own eyes, and it increased the warmth of her affection for him. It made him personally attrac-

tive. It made him possible not only as a husband but as a mate, a lover.

Yet it also added a further complication to her introspective thoughts, which were more emotional than reasoned. She did not yet know whether she wanted to marry Gerald, or what answer she would give him if and when he asked her. She often blamed herself for evading obligations, for taking the easiest course, for sliding through the war under cover of a uniform which demanded little of her; but this time she knew she must make a clear-cut decision. It would be easy to dismiss all these conjectures as baseless, imaginary, to pretend she need not bother to consider the situation before it arose. If Gerald said nothing, no harm would be done. He was discreet. He would go back to his R.A.F. duty as soon as his leave ended. She had no confidant: that meant she would suffer no humiliation. But equally Gerald must not be humiliated, as he would be, diffident and sensitive, were he to ask her and meet with a refusal or even with temporising. Gerald must be spared that. Therefore, before he asked her (if he were going to!) she must be quite clear and certain in her own mind. If she could not give him, gladly and frankly, an immediate consent, she must see to it that he had no opportunity to expose himself to a refusal. That was only fair to him. Alexander Brind, who was nice and old and safe and friendly, might be useful there. Gerald would not be able to propose if she could keep another man, an older man, at hand whenever the danger of intimacy threatened. She had realised that almost as soon as Brind spoke to her. He was the only member of the house-party not belonging to one family or the other. In all probability he had taken up an open invitation for this particular week-end, unaware that his choice was highly inconvenient to his host's plans. But his presence was fortunate for her—if she did not intend to marry Gerald Scope.

Before she left Paddington, and in the train, she had felt that she could never be more than good friends with Gerald. She had accepted this invitation dubiously, because she was too weak-willed to refuse, telling herself she must take every opportunity to see her brother who, as a Commando officer, might be killed any day without her even knowing he was in danger.

He was always liable to be suddenly ordered into battle. Almost as soon as she arrived she learned, from Lady Scope, that David had been in action only last week, in the Norwegian raid. But he surely would not be sent away again for some time, and meanwhile he was stationed with his men in the village. During the next few weeks he would see much of the Scopes. She had come half in fear, half in—not hope: curiosity. But once inside the Manor House she had learned other things, not communicable by words, scarcely to be apprehended even in these moments of introspection as she sat brushing her hair before the dressing-table in the guest-room she had used on every visit since she left school. This large and lovely old house had a power over her. It seduced the luxuriousness in her nature. It tempted her with all the casual, efficiently served, unostentatious ease of living her ancestors had enjoyed but which she knew, within her own family, only from gossip, old photographs, old letters, miniatures, a few surviving pieces of furniture.

Carol's father had been a younger son. She could scarcely remember him. He had been killed, thrown from a horse in the Pytchley country, when she was six. Her father was then a retired Guards colonel who had never held a command. He was not well to do, and not very successful, but Sir Basil had been fond of him for the sake of an old friendship first struck up at Pirbright and Birdcage Walk. Very likely it was because her father had made such a poor show in life—she guessed that she inherited this curse of indecisiveness from him—that Sir Basil, who usually wasted little time on the unsuccessful, had made a point of being kind to her mother and David and herself. As long as Carol could remember, year after year, she had been a frequent visitor to the Manor House. She had learned to shoot here, with guns given to her on her eighteenth birthday by Sir Basil. She had danced here, played tennis, bathed in the river, swam, met all kinds of people she otherwise would never have known. For David also the place was a second and more luxurious home. They were not quite dependents or poor relations, but the persistent hospitality of the Scopes enlarged their lives. It was only last year she discovered that David's fees at Eton and Sandhurst had been paid by Sir Basil, and sometimes she

suspected that he augmented her mother's small income. Had the Scopes been thinking of her all these years as a future wife for Gerald? Rearing her like a pheasant for the kill, or a thoroughbred which, if it grew as it promised, might be entered for a big race and earn prestige to repay the expense? At that thought she saw, in the mirror, the blood stain her cheeks with crimson, and the angry tide swept up to her forehead and down to her neck—too thin, in her opinion, too stalklike, overweighted by her head, just as the wide, high temples spoiled the proportions of her face. Then, her indignation cooling, she acquitted the Scopes. They were authentically kind. It was only this last year, as Gerald inadvertently betrayed his affection, that they had begun to think of her as a future Lady Scope. As likely as not, they were disappointed with Gerald's choice, but determined to make the best of it.

She liked Gerald. She was fond of him, sorry for him, and till now she had always been at ease with him; she understood him, she could unloose him from the inhibitions of his nature, she could make him happy. Who then dare to say she was contemplating a loveless marriage? It would bring her deliverance from the anxieties of genteel poverty; it would give her position, security, servants of her own in place of the perpetually changing faces of those instructed to minister to guests; it would give her comforts and pleasures to order as she wished without waiting for an invitation; it would transform her from an habitual guest into a hostess, making her in due time (the tiresome war would be over by then) mistress of this Manor House and of the mansion in Curzon Street—but all these were surely accidentals, to be accepted gratefully, legitimised by her affection for Gerald? He loved her, and she liked him. Many people, experienced and wise, would say that love balanced by liking was the ideal foundation for a happy marriage, that only once in a million times was passion matched with passion—and then the emotional appetites devoured each other, leaving behind only miseries of jealousy. Others said that a woman's potentiality for love was awakened only by marriage—at least, by sleeping with a man. Till then, a woman did not know herself. Gerald

would be a good husband, kind, patient, considerate, gentle. Why not marry him, and so learn to love him?

How many girls, since, in the history of humanity, mind and imagination and spirit—and self-consciousness!—crept into the elemental process of mating, had sat in front of their mirrors and perplexed themselves unavailingly for answers to these questions? How many, fearful of losing an opportunity, had found the wrong answer? How many had not known the right answer when it was put before them, and lived on, unwed and unloved, or married to some unsatisfactory, unsatisfied man behind whom always loomed the shadow of another, rejected in the foolishness of youth? She liked Gerald: he loved her. Gerald being Gerald, would any other girl in her position hesitate for a second? Why doubt? Doubt and indecision had been the curse of her life. Glancing at her platinum wrist-watch (a gift from Lady Scopel!) laid on the dressing-table, she fled from her introspections, glad that time had passed so quickly that she must, if she were not to be unduly late for dinner, spend all the remaining minutes in dressing her hair, powdering her face, applying lipstick, fastening the pearl drops to the lobes of her ears, all the little necessary duties of a young woman whose business is to look as pleasing as skill and forethought can make her.

Yet when her mother came, resplendent with white hair and black velvet, to make sure her daughter was looking her best for this important occasion and to chide her for refusing the services of a maid, Carol was again staring at the reflection of herself in the mirror. She was staring almost blindly, with widely opened eyes devoid of the impersonal intentness that a woman must give to her appearance if she is to attain perfection in every detail. For the first time in her life Carol was admitting to herself, without any vaunt of pride or caution of modesty, that she was beautiful, and wondering whether, had she not been blest with beauty, Gerald would love her. She wondered whether, with eyes of another colour or of a different shade of grey, with black hair or brown or red in place of the corn-golden mass she had just brushed and fingered and pinned finally into place, with mouth and nose and brows and throat altered, not as the mirror now reflected them, she would be the same person.

Her imagination made a sharp cleavage between body and spirit: she herself was not to be identified with these accidentals of flesh and blood and bone. Yet this was an act of inward thought, not of reality. Till she died she was bound indissolubly to the bodily appearance by which other people recognised Carol Blanchard, which hundreds and thousands of other girls would envy, which men admired and Gerald Scope—perhaps?—loved. Why not accept the gifts of fortune without question? Why not rejoice in them, thoughtlessly but thankfully? Why admit for a moment the intrusions of doubt and perplexity?

To these unspoken questions also she could find no answer, and, as her mother spoke with affectionate sharpness only of trivialities, Carol told her nothing. It was impossible, she decided a moment later, to communicate or even to hint, to any other living person some of the freaks and ventures of the mind. They had to remain secret. It was a rule of personal loneliness, which must simply be endured.

On the way downstairs she had a moment of panic, realising that she still did not know what answer she would give to Gerald. But by the time she entered the drawing-room, where Sir Basil was shaking cocktails, she had recovered her outward confidence. As she went in she knew that every one there admired her and approved of her. It would be very difficult to say "No"—if she wanted to say "No."

CHAPTER 11

Enigmas After Dinner

THEY dined by the light of half a dozen tall green candles arranged by pairs in silver candlesticks along the table. It was an old custom at the Manor House for small dinner parties, and one in which Sir Basil, tall and calm, handsome for all his baldness, more handsome indeed than his son, took a boyish pride. He was delighted when Brind, whose rather flat, seamed brown face took on a more suave expression with these surroundings, remarked on the charm of the great dining-room where the softly illuminated table stood like an oasis of mild golden light in the midst of shadows through which the maids moved, deft and impersonal. The dinner was simple but excellent: hare soup, creamed halibut, roast duckling, a cheese soufflé, with first a dry white wine and then burgundy. The war brought no hardship or privation within this house, and, if Carol's conscience told her so much, the accusation did not prevent her from enjoying her food and drinking with relish each of the half-glasses set before her. She observed that Alexander Brind also appreciated these unostentatious luxuries.

At the end of the dinner Lady Scope made her customary jest about leaving the "kindly" light of the candles and exposing her true age under the electric lamps of the drawing-room. Carol followed her hostess and her mother and, as she went through the door held open by Gerald, she saw in his eyes for the first time, quite naked and vulnerable, a look of adoration. It made him seem a little foolish: after all he was thirty-two and his face, like his body, was overplump. Not his fault, poor dear: his disability and his present duties in the air force made it impossible for him to get sufficient exercise. Carol felt flattered

and sympathetic and amused all at once, and then wondered if these feelings were proper in a girl about—oh, obviously, terrifyingly, about—to receive a proposal of marriage.

Over dinner a lot of questions had been put to David about the raid on Torgsdal and his own part in it. For the assembled company he was a hero and he took the heroic way out, refusing to talk about himself, merely saying that the sub-section he commanded had done very well and suffered no casualties at all. She was glad of that, remembering the boisterous young men she had seen in the corridor of the Scottish express. It was good to think that none of that youth and vigour had been stilled and silenced by German bullets. Even the fair-haired corporal with the blunt nose and the thick wrists who, unaware that she was sister to his captain, tried to entice her into conversation, had scarcely been offensive. He had given her a moment or two to laugh over in retrospect; he had been so scared, afterwards, lest she tell tales. To some girls he would seem attractive. In the nature of things all commando men must be attractive to women, selected as they were for strength and courage and endurance, and with their young virility made precarious, enhanced and in a way hallowed by the dangers they ran. David always had girls in tow. Probably more than ever now. Carol suspected they were not all girls she would like. That was the way a young man's life went, and sisters did better not to inquire too closely. The tall boy in the corridor of the train had been interesting in a different way, with his black hair and the blue of his eyes deepened by the long dark lashes. He looked different from the others. Not soft, but sensitive. Shy. Not tongue-tied, though. He had talked to her very nicely, about nothing much. He wasn't a gentleman. He lacked the accent of a gentleman: he had in fact no accent, not even an Irish one, though his name, whatever it was, had been Irish. She must ask David about him, casually, one day. When they were alone.

The four men, their cigars still unfinished, came to the drawing-room, and the talk turned again to the Torgsdal raid. Everybody wanted more information, but David, polite and smiling, refused to give it.

"Careless talk!" he said.

"Oh, but, David, surely you can tell your own mother?"

"Mothers are the worst gossips of all."

"Brind," said Sir Basil, "I'm afraid it's you he's scared of."

"For fear I might print it? The censorship would look after that. Anyhow, I'm quite used to knowing more than I ever dare write about. For the matter of that, I've heard the inside story of the raid already."

"Then you tell us, Mr. Brind. Just to spite David."

But the old journalist shook his head.

"Captain Blanchard's quite right. It will be time enough to tell it all when the war's over."

Sir Basil gave him a shrewd look over his high-bridged nose.

"I suppose that means everything didn't go as well as the official reports would have us suppose?"

"No military operation is carried out exactly as it was planned on paper. There are always surprises. And lessons to be learned. Isn't that the place? Isn't that the way the army always consoles itself?"

David Blanchard laughed.

"And the air force too, I dare say," he suggested.

Gerald Scope shook his head seriously. "I've no opinion to pass on the chaps who do the flying," he said. "I'm just one of the ground staff, one of the wingless wonders."

"Wingless but not brainless."

That was decent of old Brind, thought Carol, to see that Gerald was no fool, for all his inferiority complex. She gave him a smile.

"I can tell you this," Brind exclaimed suddenly. "Captain Blanchard said his men had no casualties, but, unless I'm misinformed, it was they who made the first landing and captured the radio station. Everything depended on that. It cut the Germans off from any hope of immediate reinforcements."

They all exclaimed at this. Carol noticed her mother becoming pink with gratification. David's exploits gave her a new value in her world, redeemed her from the gratitudes and the endless tactful inhibitions of a gentlewoman's poverty.

Brind went on. "Another thing. You remember, the rest of the

garrison, when they saw which way the fight was going, tried to escape into the mountains. In fact they very nearly did get away into a ravine. It was you, wasn't it, Captain Blanchard, who rushed a machine-gun along the ridge and cut them off?"

Carol saw her brother smile, no longer the tight, faintly artificial smile of beleaguered modesty: a grin, rather, of relief and repudiation.

"One of my men did that," he said. "But no credit to me. I didn't even give the orders. Didn't know what was going on. It was the right thing to do, and there was just about five minutes to do it in. Otherwise it would have been too late. But that's the way we train 'em. They're all encouraged to use their heads and act independently."

"Of course, dear," his mother said. "You may not have given the actual order, but it was owing to you this soldier knew what to do."

At that moment, Carol noticed, every one in the room was watching David—every one except Gerald, who was lying back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. At first she thought he was bored, and an impulse of anger sped out of her towards his plump, indolent figure. Then she saw that his eyes were focused sharply and his lips, pulled down at each corner, were moving savagely on each other. He was jealous! Envious of David! Resentful because David had been cast for the part of the returned hero, enhancing glamour with the traditional reticences and understatements of an English gentleman. She could never marry jealousy and meanmindedness.

Suddenly Gerald looked at her and as, guilt-stricken, she cleared her eyes of the traces of these thoughts, he smiled at her, sweetly and frankly. Perhaps she had been mistaken? Then she realised that Gerald was indeed jealous of her brother, but not because he was holding court here and now: what he envied David was his uncrippled strength, his ability to soldier away from an office desk. And even that secret onslaught of bitterness had been overcome in a moment. Gerald was a dear. He deserved a good wife—a better wife than she would ever make.

"Who was it?" she asked her brother. "The man who cut off the Germans' escape, I mean. Someone I know?"

"A youngster called O'Donovan."

"O'Donovan? Yes, of course. I remember him."

Perhaps David did not hear that? She had said it almost to herself. For a moment she thought Alexander Brind not only heard but read a significance, a significance she resented, into her impulsive comment. He had looked at her sharply the moment she spoke. But he was indifferent again almost at once. She was imagining things. She was being over-sensitive. Why?

Her brother went on, "Funny thing. We never expected anything like that from O'Donovan. We very nearly left him behind in England. He's very young and he hasn't been with us long. As it turned out, an old soldier couldn't have done better."

Carol was surprised as well. On the train she had picked out the dark-haired boy as being different from the other commando men; not so rough; not so sure of himself; liable to be hurt. She realised now she had felt a little sorry for him, a little protective. And apparently her compassion had not been needed. He had done something brave and decisive. He had distinguished himself in battle. Men were difficult to understand. Where they were not clever, they were thoroughly stupid. Often they were so crude and obvious that they became enigmatic. They were blunt-minded, obtuse, to so many things, yet they had their own weaknesses, guarded even from view, where they could be hurt. So many of them instinctively treated a woman as a child, an immature man—and were themselves childish in vanity and greed and self-deception. They turned everything into a game, even war, and then were offended if the game was not taken with high seriousness. Deep in her heart, Carol thought of the military profession as a ridiculous make-believe: but as soon as the make-believe flooded into reality, and produced a war, every man hurried to get himself into uniform. They all enjoyed war because they were crude and stupid. That was one reason why she had not yet joined one of the full-time services, and also why, with a concealed sense of guilt, she charged her affection for her brother with a forced gaiety, humoring him in this game of wearing uniforms, talking technical terms and professional

slang, preparing to kill and be killed. Only the facts of death and maiming preserved battlefields from absurdity. Even Gerald suffered in his self-esteem because he could not put up a pilot's wings on the breast of his tunic.

And now it seemed the boy called O'Donovan, who had looked as if he also might be standing aside, in his unspoken thoughts, from the military merry-go-round, had shown that he also took it seriously. He had won the respect of other men by accepting their values. She could no longer think of him as one apart: and, for some reason she did not pause to examine, this made her feel desolate and lonely in a world she would never understand. Perhaps time would teach her to find her way about more confidently, or else to hold her heart as a fortress against the rest of mankind. Her thoughts edged into mockery. Forty years later, she decided, she would probably be regarded as an eccentric old lady, with a queer introspective mind in which ideas repudiated by the rest of the community flapped blindly about, like bats in the dusk.

Sir Basil and Brind and David were talking earnestly now: their faces wore that expression of solemn concentration and exalted responsibility which men always assumed when they were discussing either politics or strategy. They had a sanctified look, an air of ceremonial: it arose, Carol assumed, from the fact that they were stretching mind and imagination to dispose (incidentally to the ideas they chased with words) the destinies of millions. That was where the difference lay: she was a woman and, despite resentment at many privileges denied her, she liked being a woman. Up to a point she liked being a virgin, though for several years now she had never denied in her private thoughts that she wanted a man, one man, as lover and husband. Men interested her because they were perplexing and because out of them she had to choose the one she wanted. I'm truly womanly, she considered: a bit old-fashioned under the lipstick and powder. But she would never be womanly in the sense of pretending to take all the grave games of men as seriously as they would like, as seriously as most women did. Always her mind swung away from abstracts, statistics and the destinies of millions. She could cope with people one at a time or in small

groups, up to a dozen, say. When it came to larger numbers, people were unreal to her. But men liked crowds and the idea of crowds: in a way they liked war because it herded them into battalions; and the larger the number a man commanded, the more important other men thought him. They enjoyed the excitement of crowds. It stimulated them. Even if they were alone or talking in a little group, like those three round the window, their minds were usually thinking in crowds.

Gerald was out of that discussion. Perhaps that was what made him attractive to her: because his injured arm excluded him from so many masculine activities, he had developed a more subtle, searching, individualising side of his nature. In a way, she thought, he's as womanly as I am. But he resents it. He was exhibiting what scientists called a conditioned reflex. Working at that airfield he must know all kinds of "inside stories" of dangers overcome in the air, bombing planes returning overdue, with gaping holes torn in wings and fuselage, and half the crew dead or dying. He could have matched the stories of battle drawn reluctantly from David's ungraphic lips. He could have told them much better. But all Gerald's anecdotes would have been at second-hand, stories of what other men had done, with the narrator unable to pose as their equal. Gerald was sensitive and appreciated the fundamental distinction: so he held his tongue. An accident eleven years back had cast him henceforth for a woman's part in life. It was the mental rather than the physical injury which still made him suffer.

Her guess was right: the other three men were discussing the strategy of the war, and presently the talk returned to the Commandos. Sir Basil wanted to know how they were to be used when the time came to land another Expeditionary Force in Europe.

Brind was cautious, and it was plain David thought him cynical when he said: "Expeditionary Force! That's looking a long way ahead. Right now, we're going to be rushed out of Greece faster than we went in. Not enough planes or tanks."

"But the mountains! They ought to make a good defensive line."

"Mountains don't count any more. Only fire-power."

Sir Basil returned to politics in order to jump back into strategy. "But taking the long view," he said, "America is bound to come in. She's committed in principle, and Roosevelt has his finger on the pulse of public opinion. And Hitler isn't easy about Russia. He's got to keep millions of men in the east. That means sooner or later we shall be able to take the offensive in Europe—France or Holland or Norway."

"It still seems a long way off to me."

"But we must prepare for it."

Brind conceded that, and Sir Basil went on: "I can see the value, the very high value, of the Commandos up to the point when we invade Europe. These raids keep hope alive in the conquered peoples. They play old Harry with Hitler's preparations to invade England—if he still thinks that's on the map. They show the world there's still plenty of fight left in us—and more to come later. They use up German troops in guarding the coast-line, and they keep German nerves on edge."

"There's more to it than that," said David. "We never make a raid without a definite objective. I mean, we always destroy something, do some material damage to German fortifications or industrial plants."

"But when we land a big army, how will the Commandos function then?"

David grinned. "I don't know, though I've a pretty good idea. But I'm not allowed to say anything about it."

"I suppose you'll act as a kind of vanguard, the spearhead of the advance?"

David laughed. "We'll all have to wait and see. And you mustn't forget the Reccy chaps—the Reconnaissance Corps. They've got armoured cars. They're as good as we are. Almost, anyhow. And the Airborne troops. The Commandos get into the news. But none of us thinks we're going to win the war off our own bat. Besides, the whole army's toughening up its training. We've got a short start, that's all."

There it is again, thought Carol, her thoughts unhampered by the discussion of unrationed foods she was carrying on with her mother and Lady Scope: schoolboy modesty, British understatement, fair play for every one, and never be caught boasting.

Why couldn't David say—I'm a damned fine chap and I know it, and I like being in the Commandos because I enjoy fighting! It would be more honest.

"There is a school of thought," observed Sir Basil, "or so I am informed, which holds that the time is approaching for the men in the Commandos to be returned to their various regiments. How would you view that, David?"

"I should obey orders, of course."

"But would you like it?"

"I'm very proud of my regiment. Naturally. Still, I've been with my Commando from the first. I helped to make it. That's exciting. I know all my men. On the whole, I'd prefer to see the war through with them."

Carol knew then that David had hopes of promotion, perhaps of succeeding his commanding officer. Someone had dropped him a friendly hint. That was the way men did things. They kept up the pretence of being impersonal, detached, all cool judgment and no emotional bias, but half their activities sprang from alliances, intrigues, jealousies. It wouldn't matter, if they did not deceive themselves. They joked about women gossiping and slandering each other, but whenever you found a few men together you could be sure that if they weren't talking politics or strategy or swapping stories about women, they were airing rumours or adverse opinions of other men. And they were fiercely, blankly, genuinely unaware of what they did. If she were to get David alone and ask him if he expected promotion, ask him if there was an intrigue afoot to move him up over the head of another man, he would deny it flatly. He would be shocked, sincerely indignant. Nevertheless, in a few weeks or months she would learn that he had become a major or even a lieutenant-colonel, and when she offered her congratulations he would laugh, and say he had been lucky—and he would mean it.

Brind kept his eyes shrewdly on David when he said: "I gather that some people in the army don't altogether like the Commandos or approve of them?"

"Oh, you mean rows in pubs? That happens now and again. We encourage the men to think a lot of themselves. It's policy.

Sort of *esprit de corps*. And sometimes they get across other troops, mostly line regiments. It doesn't amount to much. You usually find it starts with a row over a girl."

Yes, thought Carol, some men would enjoy fighting over a girl. And some girls would like to have men fighting over them. But no one, no one in earnest, no one she could consider seriously, seemed to wish to dispute Gerald's desire for her. What would Gerald do about it, if there were another man on the scene? What would she do? Would she enjoy it? No. Never. It would be merely vulgar.

But Brind was holding to his point. "I wasn't thinking about public-house brawls. They've always happened, ever since there were regiments. My old battalion in the last war had a permanent feud with the Buffs. I never knew why. What I meant was, in the War House, right up among the generals and lieutenant-generals, aren't there quite a few who think it's a pity the Commandos were ever started, and would like to see them quietly abolished?"

"I couldn't say."

David was being rather snooty, Carol considered. Probably because he was a professional soldier and Brind a civilian. But Sir Basil lent tentative support.

"I have heard that point of view, and I dare say there's something in it. The Commandos after all—no offence, David!—represent a break with regimental traditions. Too much pay, too much freedom. A little tightening of discipline should set that right, of course."

Generals, thought Carol, were probably more maliciously jealous, when they were not bone-stupid, than any other kind of man. She had met only one or two, who had talked nonsense to her while they danced, but she had an impression that generals were at least as given to intrigue and gossip as politicians. She might ask old Brind about that, if she could find a chance to talk to him alone. At present, she believed, he was guarding his opinions carefully.

Suddenly her attention turned to Gerald, still sitting apart, one leg over the arm of a chair, scarcely pretending to listen to the conversation of either the women or the other men. She

felt tender towards him, and remorseful. It was a shame he should be left out of things, and in his own house, even if it was partly by his own wish. She rose and went to sit beside him, and as she moved blamed herself for being an impetuous idiot. As likely as not he would realise she was trying to be kind. He was never egregious: he would not think she was making up to him, encouraging him, intimating that when he thought the time ripe to ask her to marry him he need have no fears of a refusal. He would perceive her true motive clearly enough, though whether or not he would resent it she could not tell. But her mother would think she was being discreetly clever, and so would Lady Scope. And they would both approve, damn them!

Moving from one chair to another might have been a signal, a flag flown at the masthead. Within two minutes, Sir Basil had said, "If you will all excuse us, I'd like to talk to Mr. Brind in the library. Newspaper matters, you know." So that was why the journalist was here, Carol realised: he wrote for papers that Sir Basil controlled, and was hardly free to refuse an invitation to the Manor House, though he might choose his own time for accepting it. Or else the Scopes had not known that Gerald would be on leave this week-end. Anyhow, Sir Basil was directing events, leading the stranger away to the library. That finished her little scheme for protecting herself! Her mother rose at the same time.

"And I want to talk to David. It's such a long time since I saw him."

"Only six weeks," David exclaimed obtusely.

"Well, dear, it seems a long time to me. And you've been fighting since then. Now come along up to my room, and we'll have a nice cosy chat."

Lady Scope did not wait more than five minutes before she said: "Do you know, I'm quite sleepy. It must be the spring evenings. Quite relaxing. I know you'll forgive me, Carol. Not so young as I was. Gerald will entertain you."

Carol kissed her, and was kissed in return. For a fraction of a second their glances met, Lady Scope's warm, benevolent, intimate, conspiring. Does she really think I'd make a good wife

for Gerald? But then, Carol reflected, she doesn't know me at all: no one knows me as I really am. Gerald understood her better than any one else, though he hardly ever talked to her personally. With Gerald, it was all implications, intuitions, wordless sympathies. And she was frightened of him, now they were left alone. Why? There was nothing frightening about Gerald. He would never impose himself. Probably he was terrified of her. She was frightened because if he asked her she did not know either what she ought to say or what she would say, if and when the moment came.

But he did not ask her. Not that evening. For a few unhappy moments, she suspected that he had transformed his nature, that he was deliberately withholding what he knew she must expect, playing a cruel game with her, taunting her without words, making her miserable and observing her misery with dispassionate malice. Presently, however, she realised that his taste was offended by the machinations of his mother and her mother. He was refusing to be conducted into a proposal of marriage at a time and place chosen by others. He had, on the surface, plenty of *savoir faire*, behind which he hid his vulnerability, and in a minute or two by his calm, natural friendliness he let her know, inoffensively, that she need not fear to be confronted with her dilemma that evening.

Gerald thought things out: he looked before he leaped. Impulsive and rash herself, apt to end long periods of indecision by some hasty action, regretted as soon as performed, she was grateful for his sober consideration. They talked about books, theatres, people they both knew, subjects not quite personal but not abstract or remote either, the communications of easy, undemanding friendship. Before they parted, Carol, in a flash of comprehension, realised that Gerald was giving her nearly forty-eight hours' grace. He would not propose on the morrow either. He would leave it to the Sunday, because then, if she turned him down, she would be able to go away almost at once. That would spare them both agonies of embarrassment. He had tact and discretion which you did not look for in a man, which you did not often find in a woman. He alone would not assume

that she was eager to marry him. All the more reason why she should say "Yes"—but not till Sunday!

When the time came to say good night, her affection for him was so warm and strong in her heart that she had to restrain the impulse to put her hands on his shoulders and reach up to kiss his cheek. She wondered if he knew what she was feeling. But at the door he only put his left hand in hers, as it lay at her side, and gave it a quick clasp, cool, strong, unlingering.

She dare not look back but she knew he was watching her, from the open doorway, as she went upstairs.

Men and Boys

ON the Saturday morning the little house-party rose late and, finding the weather hazy and damp, stayed indoors. David Blanchard arrived for luncheon but announced that he would be on duty in the evening: a field exercise had been improvised, beginning at eight and ending at eleven, in which a detachment of commando men was to attack the village defences held by the Home Guard platoon. David was amused at the prospect.

"I suppose it all seems a bit tame to you," Sir Basil suggested. "After the real thing, I mean."

David smiled. "In a way, yes. But we'll take it seriously. We've got to help the Home Guard all we can."

"On the whole, then," said Brind, "you approve of them?"

Sir Basil answered for David. "Of course he does. Fine chaps. That's what I call real patriotism, giving up their evenings and week-ends. Keen as mustard. Always a good turn-out, though most of them have been working long hours before they put on their khaki. If I hadn't been so involved with A.R.P. I'd have joined myself. I was offered a battalion."

"They want us to give them a good shaking up. The platoon commander asked us especially to go all out. But I've told my men to cut out the rough stuff. After all, lots of these Home Guards are quite old."

"Yes," said Brind quietly. "And they saw service in the last war. Don't forget that."

It was a reprimand, polite but unmistakable. Carol saw her mother tighten her lips and glance angrily at Brind, but David took it in good part.

"I don't," he said. "I've just been talking to the troop we've detailed for the exercise. I've told them that in the last war every battalion in the line patrolled No Man's Land every night and made a habit of raiding the enemy's positions. Not like us, once every two or three months. I've told them they'll be up against quite a few old soldiers to-night who've seen more fighting than the lot of us put together."

"And what did they say to that?"

"Oh, they know all the answers. They think trench warfare was tough but not particularly clever. They think a lot of themselves, and they're all cock-a-hoop after the show at Torgsdal."

"In fact," said Brind to Sir Basil, "they reckon they're going to make mince-meat of your Home Guard to-night. They ought to, of course."

"I'll have something to say to them if they don't," David declared.

"Who are the umpires?"

"I'm down for that. But they want some more. The more the better. What about you, Gerald?"

"Oh, I don't know anything about fighting. I'm just an office-desk warrior."

"Don't talk tripe. Anyhow, I've put you down for the job."

And after Sir Basil and Brind had agreed to act as umpires—"It's highly irregular, of course, but you've both seen active service"—Gerald also agreed. Carol could follow the track of his thoughts in the momentarily unguarded expression of his face, and she realised that had he persisted in refusing he would have been left at the Manor House with three women, and that would have overemphasised his enforced exclusion from men's activities. Moreover, his mother and her mother would have seen to it that he was left alone not with three women but with one, herself: and Gerald did not intend that to happen again till the next day.

After luncheon, warm sunshine rapidly cleared the haze, and they all went down to the river. Sir Basil had petrol for his cabin-cruiser, the last supply he expected to get till the end of the war. It took them down to Henley, past Leander and Phyllis

Court and Hambledon Lock, under the high-banked woodlands below Stonor and Fawley, before they had to turn back. River steamers, with both decks crowded, went past every half-hour.

"It's like the days of my youth," said Alexander Brind, "before every one who could afford it went abroad, and it was still fashionable to week-end up the river. Only then we wore boaters and ties with our flannels. And now there aren't even any flannels."

Above and below Henley Bridge skiffs and punts and canoes crowded the broad sun-glittering surface of the river, but they saw hardly a launch. No one, it seemed, had dressed appropriately for this early, unforeseen afternoon's holiday, the first of the summer; everybody wore khaki or service blue or whatever civilian clothes were being worn when the impulse and opportunity to go boating occurred. The only exceptions were a few scullers practising on the Regatta course, among whom Sir Basil pointed out Jack Beresford—four times winner of the Diamond Sculls.

"He won the Double Sculls just before war broke out. Open to all comers. He was forty then. He's in the Home Guard, but not in our lot—he lives in Wargrave. Just as well for your chaps, David. Look at those wrists."

"And look at his jaw, too," said Lady Scope. "I must say I like a man who looks like a man."

I suppose, thought Carol, all women admire virility, secretly or openly. Some like it cruder than others, that's all. Sensitiveness is too much to expect in a man, apart from his own feelings. They're all sensitive if their vanity's hurt. So women asked for power and decision in their men. She glanced at Gerald and wondered if he possessed these qualities, if he could be said to have them because he was determined to ask her to marry him and would choose his own time and place, and no other, to do the asking. He managed his own life in his own way. But wasn't that easy for him, having been born to wealth and position? Suppose Gerald had not injured his arm eleven years earlier, would he ever have developed his feminine sensitiveness, his quick intuitions, his wordless sympathies? Would his character now be more forceful, less considerate, more

direct—and more conventional, more closely shaped to the established mould for a man born to inherit a title and a future?

The crippled arm which so offended his pride, which he regarded as a misfortune blighting almost every aspect of his daily life, an injustice distorting and defrauding his whole destiny, might very well be the one cause of the attraction he had for her. But for that, Gerald would long since have married some ordinary, healthy, handsome girl and been completely satisfied. But for that, Carol decided, she would never have known him except superficially, as rather more than an acquaintance but less than a friend. An accident had made him introspective, and if he lacked something of virility it was not because, as he imagined, he was crippled but because he was fastidious and impressionable. Life was not universally provident, like a romantic dream. A girl must choose. She could not, it seemed, have a husband who was a man among men and also gentle, responsive, understanding. David belonged to one order, and she was fond of him. But then he was her brother. Gerald was different. Why should he suffer because he could not add to all his virtues one in which David excelled and which, anyhow, was not nearly so uncommon as the qualities Gerald did possess? If Gerald were her brother—he'd make a lovely brother, she thought—would she find David, or a man like David, an attractive suitor? Or would she be dissatisfied still, as she was now, because all possible perfections were not summed up in one man? The trouble with me, she thought, is I'm always finding fault with myself, but when it comes to choosing a husband I'm so conceited no human man could be good enough for me. I'd pick holes in Apollo Belvedere.

They dined early, so that the men could be in good time for what they had all taken to calling the "night ops." They became boyishly jocular and boyishly earnest discussing it, even Sir Basil, who had to be told what was meant by bombards, automatics and Northover projectors; he produced a notebook and took down the ranges of these weapons, and the ammunition they fired. Lady Scope exclaimed at this, and hoped there would be no danger. When they reassured her, she said: "It's

not your men I'm afraid of, David dear. It's the Home Guard. It gives them such a chance to revive old feuds between the villages."

Sir Basil laughed. "They do get worked up sometimes. We've had a few cuts and bruises, and one broken arm. But it shows the fighting spirit is there."

"The old soldiers are the worst," said Lady Scope. "You'd think at their age and after what they went through in the last war they'd have got over that sort of thing. But some of the best-behaved, quietest men in the village, men I've known all my life, become absolutely bloodthirsty when they're given a rifle and bayonet and sent out to play games on the hills."

"It will be all right this evening, anyhow. No bayonets on either side. Blank ammunition only, and thunder flashes to represent grenades. And no unarmed combat."

"That's a kind of ju-jit-su, isn't it?"

"In a way. Anyhow, it's washed out for to-night. It won't come to hand-to-hand fighting, and we ought to be able to attach an umpire to each attacking party, to stop any funny business."

"You're all going to have the time of your lives to-night, aren't you?" Carol asked suddenly.

Gerald laughed.

Gerald understands me, she thought. With him she would never hit up against a blank wall of obtuse incomprehension. And she was glad if he would really get some pleasure out of this game of playing at war.

"Even you, Gerald, even you are beginning to enjoy all this!"

He smiled at her teasingly. "Don't be so superior. I believe you'd like to come with us yourself?"

She let her mood respond to his. "Good idea. I will."

But David objected. "It's taken me all my time to get a couple of civilians smuggled in as umpires. I had to vouch for the fact that they'd both held the King's Commission."

"Just because I'm a woman!"

"Sorry. But it can't be helped."

"I'll come down to the village, anyhow, and watch you set off."

"You won't be able to see anything in the black-out," her mother protested.

Brind, however, declared there was bright moonlight outside, and hardly a cloud in the sky.

"Take a torch, dear. Just in case. And don't be late."

Her mother's was a strange mind, worrying over only what was immediately brought to her attention. Three and four nights a week, for months on end, all through the long winter, Carol had been out in the London black-out, often enough driving a car. Hardly a big raid but she had been in London, since the previous September when the gold and crimson glow over the docks lighted the whole sky and it seemed, from no farther away than Kensington, that all the City of London was on fire. And much worse since. No credit in that: thousands did the same, and when the anti-aircraft guns were shaking the city from the parks and the squares and the river, from every other street, when the high-explosive bombs were bursting in buildings already incandescent from incendiaries and shattered gas pipes, Carol had always preferred to be out of doors. Her conscience was unquiet about the pseudo-military organisation for which she worked, with its emphasis on the social status of its members: but at least it had kept her in London the last six months while London was being battered and burned by the Luftwaffe. Her mother, moved out to Ascot, had not unduly worried about her then. It was odd that here, in this quiet countryside, she should fret because her daughter wanted to walk down to the village after black-out.

On a moonlight night there would surely be a raid somewhere. Which city would draw disaster to-night—Liverpool, Birmingham, Glasgow, Bristol, Coventry, Manchester, Sheffield—or London again? There had been a bad raid in March, the worst since the old buildings round St. Paul's were burned down. She had missed that, week-ending out of Town. Was she to be lucky again? It was odd to be going out to watch companies of spare-time soldiers and the crack troops of the army prepare to fight mimic battles—armed with blank cartridges and fireworks—under the same moon which might well be lighting German bombers the way to their targets. What incommunicative words

people used to indicate the ghastly realities of war: the town filled with helpless women and children spread beneath the open bomb doors became a "target," as if it were a piece of printed cardboard at a fun fair: and those beneath the bombers, coping as best they might with death and maimings and agony, fire and blast and collapsing buildings, reported the enemy's blows as so many "incidents."

She spoke about this to Brind as they walked down the hill side by side: the white handkerchief he had tied round his arm, above the elbow, to signify his function as umpire, gleamed pallidly in the light of a moon just past the full.

"I was thinking about a raid, too," he confessed. "We're probably lucky to be out of London, though I'm told they've had quite a few bombs round here. But as for your 'targets' and 'incidents,' that's peculiar to the English. It's what lead-writers—I sometimes write leading articles myself—call our national talent for under-statement. Other nations use language as a safety-valve for the emotions. The more impressive the words, the better they like 'em. And it's not the English language—look how Americans key it up—it's the people who use it. They make words a kind of shock absorber. It's quite useful in war-time. But short of war, I rather think it's a bad habit. Puts us to sleep too easily. Like an anæsthetic against reality."

The village was lovely in the moonlight. The two successive bridges, one hump-backed, of old red brick, the other flat, with plain iron railings, were poised elegantly over the river and the stream diverted to feed the mill. The houses, with their high-walled gardens, were all curtained. Only the inns showed dim reflected signs on doors and windows: "open," "saloon bar," "lounge." Roof tiles glittered bright, but not so bright as the river water flowing softly by. There was hardly a sound except a persistent booming from the weir till they crossed the second bridge and came to a line of military trucks parked in front of the wooden-slatted walls of the mill. A few yards further on they saw soldiers drawn up in two detachments opposite each other, smoking and talking quietly. It was easy to distinguish the Home Guard because they wore steel helmets: the com-

mando men had woollen caps on their heads and as she came nearer she saw they had darkened their faces. Some of them smiled and whistled as she walked past—till the sergeant recognised her brother and called them sharply to attention. That must be how they looked when they went raiding in earnest; young faces darkened with brown stain, so that the whites of their eyes and their teeth glittered whenever they turned their heads in the moonlight.

Four Home Guard officers came up and were introduced: she knew them all slightly, but was accustomed to see them in civilian clothes, hurrying home in the evening from the London train, with umbrellas and brief-cases. Yet now they wore medal-ribbons from the last war displayed on the breasts of their tunics. They looked different in uniform: more confident, and yes, more formidable. Two of them wore white arm bands, and when she questioned them they said they were to be attached to the commando attack parties as umpires.

David spoke to both parties, outlining the purpose and method of the exercise. The troop from the Commando was to move outside the Home Guard area by trucks and come in again on foot. There were no limitations to the directions they might choose for their attacks, and if they succeeded in getting twenty men into the village who—in the umpires' opinion—would not have been put out of action if live ammunition were carried, they would be adjudged to have won the contest. Then he introduced what he called the guest umpires by name. "You must all be able to recognise them," he said, "and take note that Colonel Scope and Major Brind are wearing civilian dress." Carol had heard Sir Basil called "Colonel" before, but the journalist's rank came as a surprise, till she realised that he must have held it, as a temporary soldier, in the 1914-18 war. That would be before I was born, she thought: just before.

The Home Guard commander refused to move off till the commando men had climbed into their trucks and driven off.

"We give nothing away," he said.

"See you later," one of the Home Guards called to the men in the trucks, and someone shouted back: "We'll grab this place without your seeing us at all."

There was a lot of laughter at that. Soldiers' jokes were very simple, Carol decided.

David and Gerald and Brind went with the commando men.

"You'd better go home now," said Sir Basil to Carol. "Sure you'll be all right?"

"Of course."

He marched off with the Home Guard, looking very pleased with himself.

CHAPTER 13

Moonlight Madness

AS SOON as the men had gone the village became, almost abruptly, still and empty. Carol walked slowly on to the bridge over the main stream of the river and stood there for a moment, resting her arms on the parapet, listening to the water murmuring beneath her feet, flowing past the wooden posts, bleached and worn, which guarded the osier beds. She let the silver benigance of the moonlight on water and roofs and leafing chestnuts and willows, old stone and brick work, on her own ungloved hands, soothe like a balm into her nerves. The air was warm after the afternoon sunshine, without either the frosty crispness or the thickening damps of winter: it promised spring and the full tide of summer. She had no desire to turn back yet, preferring solitude and the communion of her own thoughts.

When she left the bridges behind her and came among the curtained houses again, with only a policeman and a warden in the street, talking in undertones, she wished she had a long walk, instead of a mere half a mile, between her and the Manor House. If I were a man, she thought, I could turn into a pub, call for a drink, and find someone to talk to. Instead, she must go back and listen to her mother and Lady Scope exchanging unimportant gossip until, some time after the nine o'clock news on the radio (they would probably insist on listening to the postscript as well!), she could decently go to bed. A telephone call-box tempted her, but she had come out without a handbag. Then she remembered a Scots girl in her office in London who boasted that she never used a public telephone without pressing Button B to see if some previous user had forgotten to recover

the two pennies inserted for an unsuccessful call. I'll try, she thought, just for fun. If I do get them——

The impulse had taken her inside the booth, the door swinging softly to behind her. She pressed her thumb on the lower button, and was incredulous when she heard coppers rattling into the tray. But they were real: she picked them up and pushed them quickly into the slot as she lifted the receiver. All her actions seemed dreamlike, over-deliberate, as if some other person were performing them and she was observing, bemused, absolved from responsibility, spellbound. It seemed a stranger's voice, not her own, low but very clear in the little glass-and-concrete box, which asked the operator for the Manor House number and, responding a few seconds later to a muted "Hello," pressed the front button to complete the connection.

She recognised the maid who had answered. "This is Miss Carol. I'm in the village. Will you tell Lady Scope it's such a lovely night I'm going for a walk before I come back. No, don't bother to bring her. Just say I shan't be late. About ten, I expect."

Did the maid detect anything unnatural in her voice? Did she think it strange to receive such a message? After all, what was wrong with a country walk on a moonlit night? Only that it would never have happened if someone had not forgotten to recover unused coppers from a call-box. Or was that all? Perhaps she was a little crazy this evening, a little fey, rapt out of her normal self. The moon was full, and spring was pulsing in the washed, brilliant air. On such a night the light of the moon, it was said, affected certain people; it transcended reason, lifted secret impulses into power, unloosed restraints. A lunatic was a person moonstruck. Yet, Carol thought, I am sane enough, an ordinary sort of girl, without special talents, better-looking than most perhaps, rather apt to dodge decisions, to swither about in my mind, to be fond of Gerald and not quite sure if fondness equals love. But all that was locked inside her: outwardly she had no eccentricities, and there was nothing outrageous about a solitary walk under a full moon. Yet ever since she had yielded to the impulse which sent her into the telephone-box and astoundingly presented her with two pennies, as if by a magic

intervention, she had been aware that she was no longer calm. An unaccountable exultation quivered in her blood, an exultation without origin or purpose, not restless, yet not self-sufficient: expectant, rather.

She walked up the short, steep hill, unaware of her own vigorous pace, past high walls of mellowed red brick over which the sprawling creepers and rambler roses were already richly festooned, leaves and buds poised and delicately enamelled in the light of the moon. Turning where the shadows of tall elm trees dappled the pale road-dust, she came out on the high flat tableland overlooking the river valley. The light was so strong and pellucid that she could see, level with her eyes and apparently near at hand, a landscape of distant, wooded hills, scalloped and pinked irregularly against the silvered star-strewn sky, with glimpses of waterways winding far below in a long resplendent curve. No wonder, she thought, that the Nazi planes made for this place and sometimes flew to and fro over the valley, taking bearings on the plainly marked and unmistakable course of the river. The Nazis had made the loveliness of the long, sun-drowsy days of the last summer, the summer of 1940, the summer of Dunkirk, anguished and sinister, as they raided morning and afternoon, day after day, threatening invasion, conquest, oppression. And when that menace was taken away, after the Messerschmitts and Heinkels and Junkers had crashed in tens and twenties and sometimes in hundreds, trailing the black smoke of defeat down the cloudless blue skies, they had turned to the concealment of the longer nights. All through the long, hard, desperate winter night bombers had raided the cities of England with the prodigious indiscrimination of angry bullies, till the enchantment of moonlight became an evil magic, corrupt and dreaded.

The end of winter should bring a respite, which not even the devil could grudge to those who had endured so much; but, as Carol walked along the straight road and climbed again, past a large orchard where the apple and pear blossoms spread in clouds of tranquil silver spray, she saw that along the higher, eastern hills the sky shimmered with tiny sparkings of gold and crimson light, more evanescent than the stars. That meant an

anti-aircraft barrage. That meant that London was being raided, that hundreds, perhaps thousands were being killed and maimed, and millions were in danger. She felt ashamed of her exemption and sick with helplessness, here in this quiet solitude, where the guns could scarcely be heard as a distant reverberation even if she halted and listened with straining ears. She was glad when a dip in the road and an intervening copse shut off from her sight those remote, diminished shell-bursts.

Her fluent, uncontrolled thoughts (they were feelings, entranced feelings, rather than thoughts) regained serenity as she turned off downhill by a thatched barn, along a side road, fringed with beech woods. The walk, she decided, had done her good: she felt justified for having followed her impulse. Her indecisions were not resolved, but she had evaded them, and she now took it for granted that when, the following day, Gerald asked her to marry him, some providential instinct would tell her what answer to make. It was like going into a telephone-box without the means to pay for a call: you took a chance, you pressed a little knob of white metal, and either you were given two pennies, or you were not. One way or the other, your problem was solved for you. By this time she had walked herself out of the mood of fanciful and hopeful exultation. She could smile at the foolish romanticism in which she had set out, ascribing it now to a seasonal restlessness, humanity's equivalent for the stirrings of the sap in bough and leaf, commonplace phenomena caused by the coming of the spring, disquiets which physicians could account for in Latinised phrases, though they were of no moment except possibly to poets and lovers. She possessed, as she well knew, no faculty for making poetry, and apparently she was not in love. She would make a sensible marriage, and every one would approve, and she would live to a ripe, sensible old age. That would be in every way more satisfactory than—than what? She did not know. She had never known. She never would know. And in time she would forget that once she had wished, longed, yearned, agonised to know.

A few minutes later she was startled out of the privacy of her introspections. Walking along the narrow road, banked and ditched and fenced on both sides, she looked at her watch and

seeing that the time was nearly half-past nine, decided to turn away through the next gateway on her left. She knew she could cut through the woods, by bridle-paths and drives, almost straight along the hillside to the Manor House. To go down to the village again by the main road would mean returning later than ten, later than she had promised. Her mother would grow anxious and fretful. But by the short-cut she could even spare time to sit on this gate and smoke a cigarette. She crossed the road, climbed up the wooden slats, took out a cigarette, and was feeling in the pockets of her short tweed coat for her lighter, when a voice spoke to her. It was a man's voice, hoarse, low, near at hand, close to the ground.

"If you please, miss, don't light that fag."

A ripe, resonant, Berkshire accent. A poacher perhaps?

"And don't speak loud, either. We're expecting the Comandos any minute."

The village Home Guard! She had quite forgotten their field exercise. She could see no one, but supposed the man was lying in the black shadow behind the hedge. She had stumbled into one of their ambushes, and was likely to spoil their enjoyment. It was a new experience to have her presence so fiercely resented.

"All right," she whispered back. "I won't." And then, inquisitively: "How many of you are there?"

"Can't tell you that, miss. That's information, that is." In a different tone the unseen man added: "George, you watch your front. And keep them big feet o' yourn still."

Carol said: "I suppose you'd rather I went on?"

"If you wouldn't mind, miss. You show up, sitting up there, besides making a noise. And there's likely to be a bit of a scuffle hereabouts before long."

As she swung herself over the gate and dropped quietly into the gravel drive on the other side, she heard a single, small sound of explosion, hollow and echoing. She judged it to be about a quarter of a mile away.

"That'll be Sarnt Ruscombe's section," said one of the Home Guards. "We shan't be long now."

"Shut up. Your job's to watch out and listen."

They had forgotten her already.

She walked on, the unlighted cigarette still in her hand, and then heard, from near the gateway behind her, one, two, three sharp reports in rapid succession. It seemed that the Home Guards had brought off their ambush. They would be very pleased with themselves.

She left the drive where the woods were broken by a long and wide glade of thick grass where the beaded dew glistened in the moonlight. On the far side she searched the bushes for the bridle-path she knew would lead her to the Manor House, and not finding it at once, stopped to light her cigarette. It could do no harm now.

But again the whispering voice of an unseen man arrested her.

"Don't. You'll give my position away."

"You Home Guards seem to be everywhere to-night. I must say you hide yourselves very well."

"I'm not Home Guard, Miss Blanchard."

One of David's men. She thought she knew which one.

"Where are you, anyway?"

"Here. Under this bush. If you want to smoke, come in here. There's a kind of pit. It's quite dry."

She knew the voice now. At least she suspected. She was, surely, entitled to verify her guess? That was sufficient reason, the only reason, for what she was doing now, bending under the boughs of a hawthorn bush which the young commando man was carefully, quietly, parting to admit her. The tree grew out of the side of a grassy pit, completely overshadowing it. After the moonlight, the darkness seemed intense. She could not see him yet, but she was quite sure of his identity now.

"You're Mr. O'Donovan, aren't you?"

Why did she put in that "Mr."? For a private soldier a surname was sufficient.

He nodded. She could trace the movement of his head with the close-fitting woollen cap hiding his hair. Then he made a gesture which seemed to indicate that she should sit down. Surprisingly, she did so. At least she ought to have been surprised, but instead it seemed natural, and natural, too, when

he sat beside her, his hands on his outspread knees, with the tommy-gun between them.

He lighted her cigarette, and then his own. She watched deliberately to see his face in the brief small illumination, the blue eyes with thick lashes, the whites very clear, the smooth, faintly hollow cheeks, the boyish softness of the mouth. He was absorbed, almost solemn, as he bent his head to the guarded match flame and then flicked it out. Some girls would think him handsome, but he was different from her one memory of him. She could not identify the difference.

"You're sure they won't be seen—our cigarettes?"

"Not if we hide them like this." He cupped his hand, so that the lighted ash faced inward. She shifted her own cigarette, feeling the heat on the skin of her palm: when she drew in smoke, her lips pressed on the nails of her fingers and thumb. It was clumsy, a way of smoking she had always thought vulgar: but here it seemed amusing and exciting.

"Those noises I heard—I suppose that was blank ammunition?"

"Yes. We ran slap-bang into one of their posts. Never saw them. Of course, it would be different in real war."

She had forgotten that. He was not just a boy playing boys' games against older men who had never grown up. A week or so back he had been fighting in earnest, in the cold snows of Norway, killing Germans. He had done something very brave and soldierly there.

"Just the same," he said, "those Home Guards are no fools. They know their own country. They use every bit of cover there is. You just can't find 'em."

"And what about you? Ought you to be alone?"

"I slipped past on the flank. I expect the others have gone back. They'll try another route. I thought I'd wait here for a bit, to see if they came this way."

"Do you think they'll get through?"

She could see his teeth glitter among the shadows in a quick, confident smile.

"Of course we'll get through. We're good."

He was a boy after all!

Suddenly she had a perception. "I know what it is. I know what's different about you. You've darkened your face."

"We always do that for night work. I've got a camouflage net, too, to go over my head. Otherwise your eyes show up. I'll put it on when I move off."

As soon as the cigarette was finished he would leave her, to rejoin his comrades, to finish the evening's game of mimic warfare. It was ridiculous that she did not want him to go.

"Listen!"

After a pause, she said: "I don't hear any one."

"It isn't that. Planes."

She heard the engine notes in the sky then, far away.

"I expect they're trainers practising night-flying. There are quite a lot of airfields round here, you know."

He shook his head. "No. They're night-fighters. Can't mistake that whistling sound. I wonder what they've gone up for."

"There's a raid going on over London."

"Yes. I saw the barrage!"

"Do you know London?" she asked.

"I ought to. I was born there. Just outside, anyway. Denham. It used to be country then."

She nodded. "I remember Denham before there were any new buildings."

"Do you?"

He was pleased. It was a bond between them. "But I'm Irish really," he said. "All Irish by blood."

"It's queer. I don't even know your name."

It was unaccountable, she meant, that she should be sitting here under a hawthorn-bush, at night, the dark woodlands behind her, the wide, still glade in front, like a pallid lake of moonlit grass, side by side with a young soldier to whom she had not been introduced, whom she would never have known but for her unpredictable impulses. A nice girl—or was it just an ordinary girl?—would not have found herself in such a situation.

He understood the implication, accepted it without comment, and answered her unspoken question.

"My name's Emmet."

"My name's Carol," she said.

Now she had taken them clean out of any pretence of an impersonal relationship. She could not go back on it now! She did not want to.

"How do you spell your name?" she asked.

He told her, and added: "I'm named after Robert Emmet. He was hanged by the English for starting a rebellion."

"And now you're fighting for the English."

He nodded. "But I'm Irish just the same. And very proud of it."

A moment later, he said: "I recognised you down in the village. Before we started."

She very nearly said: Why didn't you speak to me? But of course he could not speak to her then, on parade. Only here and now, with no one to see and no one to hear, could they talk.

But he had nothing to say for long seconds.

They sat in silence, the crimson tips of their cigarettes occasionally glowing, and sometimes their shoulders touched. I'm crazy, and disreputable too, she thought, knowing that he wanted to kiss her, knowing he was afraid of offending her, knowing that she wanted him to realise she would not be offended. Her pulsing blood made her thoughts race faster, panicking between desire for his kisses and repudiation of the desire. She urged herself silently to stand up and leave him, and at the same time argued that there could be no harm in staying. He was young and diffident and embarrassed: and so was she. Even when he made her want to laugh—but she would never do that for fear of hurting him!—he pierced straight to her heart, unloosing affection and desire. No other man had ever had such an effect on her. But then she had never sat alone with a man in half-darkness secluded even from the moonlight. She must be victim to a madness of the moon! Or else she had fallen in love!

The night-fighters were flying high overhead now, unseen against the stars, and behind the thin sustained screech of their passage was a deeper, louder, labouring noise filling the high sky.

"That a Jerry!"

A private soldier's expression. Her brother, almost any other

man she knew, would have said, That's a Boche. The plain English familiarity was better. Anything that Emmet O'Donovan preferred was better.

He pointed forward, up to the high shoulder of the hill where the glade ended and the shadowy woods swept round.

"There they go. That'll be my sub-section."

She could see neither men nor movement.

"How do you know who they are?"

"They're wearing caps, not tin hats."

"I can't see anything."

"They've gone now. Showed themselves for just a second or two. I'll rub it into them for that."

He dropped the end of his cigarette and ground it into the grass with his heel. Now he was going to leave her. They had been alone together all these minutes, and all they had said and done was as formal as if they had been in a drawing-room. She was a fool, fanciful, demented, irresponsible, and lucky to be let out of this dilemma without embarrassment, lucky that she had hit on a young man who realised she was at heart a nice girl, a young man who would not take advantage of her foolish aberration.

The next minute she thought she had made the most disastrous mistake about him, for no sooner had he stood up, bending his head to avoid a branch of the hawthorn, than he lurched towards her with outstretched hands, thrusting her, back and shoulders, down to the ground. Alarm and horror prevented her from hearing the screaming downflight and final thud of the bombs. She shuddered as an explosion tore upwards in the woods behind; a crimson brilliance seared across her eyes, and the earth reverberated. His hands tightened on her arms. He was very close, lying beside her. She could see his tense dark face staring past her shoulder. Another explosion in the woods. Another. Each of them farther away. There were tiny patterings amid the bushes. Then a long silence.

"That's the lot," he said. "Stick of three. The first went pretty well over our heads."

Mortification, shame that she should have thought ill of him, chilled her. She did not know what to say or do. She felt unable

to move. She was grateful that he talked, blunt, matter-of-fact, about nothing that mattered.

"The swine must have been getting rid of his load anywhere. He couldn't mistake this for an airfield."

Then they heard, from the village in the valley, the sustained melancholy undulance of the siren sounding the air-raid alert.

"A bit late," he said. "I suppose they thought that plane was making for somewhere else."

Drawn sharply across the wailing of the siren, like jerky slate pencils, went short urgent whistle-blasts from here and there. She paid no attention. She sat up, aware that her hat had fallen off, her hands instinctively going up to tidy her hair.

"Thank you," she said, and heard with surprise her own voice, weak and uncertain. As she turned towards him she discarded, in a rapture of joyful apprehension, the last link with her everyday life. By a look, by a gesture, by some emanation from her heart, precisely how she would never know, she told him: and in a second his arms were round her, strong and warm and urgent, holding her in to him. Her head tilted back to receive his kiss.

Presently she loosened his embrace. She was committed now. What had happened could never be undone, never be forgotten. She had a lover. Henceforward her life was changed. She was exultant, without doubts or anxieties, without regrets. She had become another woman. She had achieved what she longed for. She had this man, this boy, for her lover. There were no words for what had happened to her. It was nothing: kisses and an embrace. But it was everything. It was hallowed. It gave a meaning to all existence.

Boyish and unwise, he sought words for what lay beyond the scope of words.

"I love you," he said. "I think I must have loved you the first minute I saw you. In the train. I suppose you've forgotten that? I remembered. Even in Norway, I remembered."

She forgave him the unnecessary explanation. She even loved him for it. She rejoiced in him. She was proud of him. She let him exhaust her with kisses. She pushed the khaki woollen cap up and off his head and rumpled his hair, delighting

in the feel of it between her fingers. He was hers now. Because she could not see him clearly in the shadow under the bush, she touched his face, stroking it gently, learning through her fingertips the shape of his forehead, and his jaw, his throat and his thin spare cheeks, the pitting of his eye-sockets, the jut of his nose, and then learning it all again with soft roving kisses. She had no shame left with which to conceal her delight in him.

It was long before the sense of the outer world returned to them.

When they walked out into the moonlight she looked at her watch. "It's nearly eleven. Your exercise is supposed to finish at eleven, isn't it?"

"They called it off after the bombs fell. That's what those whistles were for."

"Oh, but you shouldn't—you ought to have gone at once!"

"And leave you?" He laughed.

"Did you know? At the time?"

"Of course."

He had chosen then, between her and his other world, the world of men and soldiering. She adored him for that. But she was remorseful and anxious.

"You'll get into trouble! I can't bear to think you'll get into trouble because of me."

"I'll be all right. Don't worry about me."

"But I do. I've been selfish, thoughtless, hateful."

The words were no sooner spoken than they were kissed away from her penitent lips.

He walked with her till they came in sight of the Manor House. They did not speak of the future, except that he asked her to meet him the next afternoon. She agreed at once. She could deny him nothing.

As she went through the grounds she saw a torch flashing in front of her. When it came nearer, she called out. It was Alexander Brind.

He seemed relieved to see her. "I came out to look for you as soon as we got back. We were all worried. Those bombs! Where were you?"

"Quite close to them," she said. "Too close. But I'm all right. Was my mother anxious?"

He nodded.

As they emerged from the black shadows cast by the shrubberies into the moonlight, he glanced at her curiously.

She laughed. "I tell you I'm as right as rain. A bit scared, but not even shaken. In fact, I'm very happy."

The old journalist remained serious. "It's much colder now," he said. "You mustn't catch a chill."

She had not noticed that the night air was cooling.

"Well, we're almost indoors now."

"Better put this coat on, just the same."

He slipped out of his mackintosh and held it up for her. Ridiculous fussiness. She tried to walk on, but he insisted. She had to give way. She hung the coat over her shoulders.

He led her to a side door.

"Look," he said, "you run upstairs and tidy up. I'll go and tell your mother and Lady Scope that you're safe. Then I'll find the others who are out looking for you."

Others! I suppose I must have been in danger in the woods, she thought. She had forgotten all about the bombs after Emmet had kissed her and told her he loved her. She had forgotten about every one in this house—including Gerald. She would have to think about Gerald. But that problem had settled itself. Poor Gerald! He would be out in the grounds now, or perhaps farther away, searching for her. He was fond of her. For the matter of that, she was fond of him. But fondness was not love. If he loved her he would not have been so slow, so deliberate, so careful. He was older than Emmet, much older, not nearly so boyish. At the same time he was not a man as Emmet was. Yesterday, or even to-day, Gerald might have persuaded her, inexperienced, ignorant as she then was. Now it was too late. Useless to be sorry for him. He did not love her. A lover threw discretion and forethought aside, took his opportunities, made his own decisions, as Emmet had done.

To Brind she said: "I'll go to the drawing-room and tell them myself. Then I'll help you find the others. I'm sorry to be such a nuisance."

"No. Go to your room first. Please! And keep the coat on."

It was only when she was in her own room that she understood the reason for Brind's insistence. When she lifted his coat from her shoulders twigs and leaves fell to the carpet, and, turning, she saw there were still more caught in the nap of her tweed coat and skirt, at the back. A girl going for a solitary walk in the moonlight would not return home with such telltale evidence. Even if she threw herself to the ground, because a German plane was about to drop its bombs, she would fall face forwards: it was the technique prescribed in numberless little books and newspaper articles. Her face burned. She had reduced her status; she was classified now with girls who go out seeking dark corners of lanes and public parks to giggle and be pawed about! And old Brind knew! What must he be thinking of her? She hated his forbearance, his straightfaced tact. Still he had saved her from what might have been a disastrous entrance to the drawing-room, from embarrassing questions put by her mother and Lady Scope, from confusion, humiliation, a tangle of improvised excuses.

When she went to her dressing-table and sat in front of the triple-mirror, she realised she had escaped, thanks to Brind, still greater hazards, for there were brown smudges across her cheeks and her forehead. They puzzled her till she guessed they came from the stain Emmet had put on his face. Her eyes stared back at her, large, bright, excited, reflected in the mirror. Stained and bedraggled as she was, she took pleasure in her appearance, triumphant, a little wild, a little enchanted still. She wanted to be lovely for Emmet's sake. The mirror no longer stirred her to introspection and distrust. She was glad of every physical benefit Nature had bestowed on her. And glad even of the smudges on her face: they were evidence that she had not dreamed, that she had been kissed by her lover and had returned his kisses, that her life was transformed. She had escaped from an inward loneliness: nothing occurring in her secret mind, however fanciful, elusive or precious, but she could tell it now to her lover, tell it, and share it, and by the act of sharing, enrich it.

She put her hand to her cheek and rubbed some of the stain

off on her fingertips. It was slightly greasy. It smelled like coconuts. She liked it, because it came from Emmet O'Donovan. She would have preferred to leave the smudges there, to go to sleep with the coconut smell of them in her nostrils: they were all she had brought away to remind her of him, till they met the next day. But to leave them was out of the question. There was another world, in which no one must know, yet, what had happened between her and Emmet; and that other world had to be faced, engaged and mastered on its own terms. If she wasted any more time, her mother would be up here in her room, seeing what she must not see, asking questions she had no right to ask. Swiftly Carol brushed her clothes, washed her face and hands, dabbed on powder and lipstick, and hurried downstairs. They were all waiting for her, good, kind, considerate friends against whom she must now defend her privacy with reticence, with evasions, if necessary with lies, for what she defended was precious and belonged to her lover.

CHAPTER 14

Conversation Over Coffee

ON THE Sunday morning, after a night broken by wakeful imaginings which she could not distinguish from dreams, Carol opened her eyes at seven o'clock to bright sunshine. As she lay cosseted in warmth and the smooth resilient comforts of an expensive bed, her exultant delight in new-found love lost impetus, faltered, and at last abandoned her, bewildered, dubious of past, present and future. A little later there was no poise, no certitude left to her. Her mood swung violently from one extreme to another. In the first, unaware moments of waking it plunged back with the single intent of reviving memories of the meeting with her new young lover, her first lover, her only lover, under the hawthorn shadows: these were indulgences which made no contact with any other part of her life, and by their blind and rapturous intensity shut out everything but sensation and emotion. Existence turned inward and backward to recapture the feel of her lover's lips on hers; the feel of his hand, strong but deft and gentle, clasping hers, twining fingers between fingers; the feel of his arms about her, firm against her shoulders and waist, holding her close to him, so that all her body burned and softened and stirred towards him; the feel of his face, lean and cool, under her fingertips; and again the searching sting, the invigoration, and the languor of his kisses on her lips, magical, powerful, transforming her from an ignorant girl to a woman confronted with her personal destiny. But memory could not sustain these moments. Her mood changed unwillingly, as if an icy wind struck from her mind to her body and back, by a rapid infection of chills, to her mind. What had happened the

evening before began to appear fantastic, incredible, a dream or a nightmare for which she had no responsibility. It became unreal to her. It did not belong to the world in which she had lived for twenty years—her only world. It was a stupid idea which had crossed her mind: a quirk, a daydream in moonlight, not to be mentioned, not to be thought of without discomfort: the sooner it was forgotten the better for everybody.

She would be sensible. She would take a grip on actuality, master it, hew out of it a safe and durable niche for herself. No one knew what had happened last night—except the boy who had shared that hour of moonstruck fantasy with her. He would not tell. As likely as not he was accustomed to picking up girls after nightfall and cajoling from them as much as they would yield. She was for him just a girl met by chance, an escapade, one of many. That was what private soldiers were like, quick to snatch what they called their fun, quick to forget it. In a week he would no longer remember her, in a week he would find a village girl pretty enough to divert him and give him whatever consolations he needed. But he knew who she was! What if he boasted to his friends that he had held his officer's sister in his arms, in the lonely woods by night, and kissed her till, absurdly innocent and trusting, she sighed her rapture aloud to the moonlit night? That would be degradation, to have her name tossed about in ribaldry among soldiers. But he would not boast, because no one would believe him. He would not dare to boast! And if he did, she would never hear of it. No one that mattered to her would hear of it. In twenty-four hours she must go back to her duties in London: that would be a release. The next time she returned to the Manor House, the commando men would have gone: they were always on the move. The War Office was merciful to foolish girls who lost their sense of responsibility on moonlit nights in spring.

This was Sunday. Already the maids were up and about their duties in the big house: somewhere far away, on the ground floor probably, she could hear the unrelenting whirr of a vacuum-cleaner. It was a horrid noise. It put her in mind of night-fighter planes invisibly seeking here and there, apparently among the stars, for a Heinkel or a Dornier which dropped

bombs to burst crimson in the woods, to thud reverberations into the earth—and to send a silly girl into the embrace of a young man conveniently at hand. This was Sunday morning, bringing with it daylight, calm reflection, common sense, sound judgement. This was the day on which she had, light-headed and irresponsible, promised to meet—three o'clock by the weir!—the boy with the Irish face and the Irish name and the English voice which was not a gentleman's, the voice you could only call "educated." Even if she went, he would not be there. It would add foolishness to foolishness for her to steal away to the weir at three o'clock and expose herself to the humiliation of waiting in vain. Of course he would not be there! He would not come because on this same Sunday morning he also would be waking to chill reality. He would realise it was impossible for her to keep her promise. He would not expect it. He would be sensible and put that mad moonlight hour behind him, an isolated adventure, an hour of romance never to be repeated. He was a nice boy. She did him wrong to suppose he would boast. He would not disclose her name to his comrades. He would keep that one memory as something precious, private, personal to himself, to be treasured for ever—but not to be repeated.

She would never see him again. It was better that way. Perhaps he would feel hurt at first, but later, as he grew older, as he learned to acknowledge the limitations laid on all human beings who cannot escape the obligations of environment, he would understand. When he was older he would think of her tenderly, and forgivingly, and respectfully. He would regret he had not been born into a world where he and she could live day by day together, but he would realise it was impossible for her to go on with what she had so rashly begun. She must do what was right. It would be wise and kind, as well as sensible, not to keep that appointment by the weir. The path to the weir was the way to trouble, pain, disillusionment. She must never see him again. She must forget him. No, she could not do that. But she must keep him, for his sake as well as for her own, pinned by memory to that one demented hour last night. It would be something she could think about secretly, as she grew

older, right into the time when she would be very old; something she would share with only one other person in the world, the only other person who would ever know of it—and who would never see her again.

Remotely, as if she watched a speck-sized figure on a distant horizon, she observed a creature—herself!—who was mean and weak, for through all these later considerations of hers a third party had intruded, undefined, unacknowledged: Gerald Scope. He had not spoken a word to confirm her surmise; yet she knew, with a certainty needing no assurance, that on this Sunday still stretching long and intimidating before her he would find or make an opportunity to ask her to marry him. She could fence for time. She could pretend surprise. But she would not do either. She must give Gerald an immediate Yes or No. He had a right to that. And she could not answer him, at whatever time of day he chose, if she had it in her mind now, before she had even risen, to go to the weir and keep an absurd rendezvous with another man. That also she owed to Gerald. Therefore she was determined not to keep the rendezvous. She struck Emmet O'Donovan out of her life. Her thoughts screwed up the memory of what had happened under the hawthorn-tree, like a piece of discarded paper, to be thrown into the fire, consumed there and forgotten.

Then the tears started hot under her eyelids, and when her mother came into the room to wish her good-morning and discuss the arrangements for church-going, her face was stained and swollen with weeping. She would not answer questions. She refused breakfast. She elected to spend most of the morning in bed. She allowed her mother to make her own assumptions and go downstairs to tell the rest of the house-party that poor dear Carol was not very well this morning, that she must have been nearer to the bursting bombs than she had admitted, that her nerves were upset, but the child was being very brave about it.

To every one, Lady Scope, the maids, David, who came to the bedroom, Carol was rude and peremptory, demanding only to be left alone. She kept her face hidden by bedclothes: it told tales. After eleven, when the house was quiet—she had

heard her host and hostess and their guests leave for church—she rose and bathed and dressed quickly. She made her own bed, feeling hungry and faint and exhausted.

She hurried downstairs and no one saw her till she was almost out of the house. But before she could move to the front door, Walters, the maid with the big pale flat face which had not changed these twenty years, came into the hall.

"Oh, Miss Carol, I'm so glad you're better."

"Quite all right now. Sorry I was such a nuisance."

"I'll get you some breakfast, Miss Carol."

"No." She repeated her refusal, ill-temper rising shrill in her voice. "I don't want anything."

The servants in a house like this must be resigned to inconsiderate and untimely demands, but girls who were poor, professional guest girls, should not presume on their dependent status. She had made her bed and tidied her room: that contribution, and no breakfast, should compensate a little for her bad behaviour this morning.

The library door opened. They hadn't all gone to church then, damn them! It was Alexander Brind who looked out at her.

Mercifully he asked no questions. To Walters he said: "I'd like some coffee, please. And bring some for Miss Blanchard. And some biscuits, too. As quick as you can."

The maid hurried off.

Reluctantly Carol felt an impulse of gratitude towards Brind and summoned a smile as she walked into the library past the door he held open. After all these years she was still a little awed by the Manor House library, with its tall windows, its glass-fronted cases full of leather-bound books, its old portraits and miniatures and framed documents, its racks of weapons and discarded jewellery, its proud and reticent witness to the length and prosperity of the Scope heritage. It seemed an odd room to be entering at twenty minutes past eleven in the morning. Then, as she dropped into a brown leather chair, resting elbows and wrists on the padded arms, she thought that all this was hers for the taking. She had only to make a clean break with one young man, whom she scarcely knew, and say yes to

another, an old friend, and she would possess security, ease, tradition, service and admiration, a final deliverance from all the heart-searing perturbations which beset her.

She looked at the grey-haired journalist as if she were already mistress of her environment and he a casual, not very important guest, a subject for courtesy, a transient on whom a good hostess might practice, without undue exertion, the gracious arts of hospitality.

But it all rang false in her heart. Her heart was still in anguish, crying to attain the unattainable, desiring what was so poor it could not be thought of within these soberly lavish walls, and yet so rich that—once thought of—it made the whole Manor House seem insubstantial and trifling.

"You'd better not smoke yet," said Brind.

"Why?"

"It never does any one any good to smoke before breakfast."

"How did you know? Oh, you heard Walters, of course. Kind of you to take an interest in my welfare."

He paid no attention to that. She assumed that he treated it as a piece of schoolgirl sarcasm. He went to a desk by one of the windows, took up some papers, folded them and put them into an envelope, which he sat down to address. He was one of those men, she thought, who carry their age gracefully, without any undue striving after dignity. She remembered she had liked him from the first. Wearing horn-rim spectacles this morning, he seemed kinder than ever, and trustworthy. He had never been either pompous or facetious with her, like so many men of his years. She thought she discerned strength in the set of his shoulders and in the lines seamed into his brown serious face.

"You must have a lot of moral courage," she said.

"Why? How?"

"Not going to church with the others. Very few people who come here manage to avoid it."

"I'd have liked to go, but I had to finish an article."

"Do you work on Sundays, then, in Fleet Street?"

"Any day. Every day. I had to work this morning because the post goes early here."

"Couldn't you take the article with you to town in the morning?"

"I'm going to Manchester to-morrow. You seem quite upset I'm not at church?"

Shamed by her own bitter tongue, she said: "It's I who ought to apologise for intruding on you."

"No. I'm glad you're here."

Walters came and put a tray on the heavy circular oak table beside the arm-chair. Walters said nothing beyond, "Will that be all?" and was gone as soon as she received a nod and a smile. But Carol thought she had been subjected to a searching glance. Curiosity? Or kindness? What could Walters know of love, spending her whole adult life here in service to the Scopes, unmarried, the wrong side of fifty now, waiting to be pensioned off? Why shouldn't Walters know love? She might have been pretty as a girl; she might not always have been an unemotional automaton of domestic service. Under the maid's blue frock and the maid's white overall, Walters must have a heart—a heart not merely for others, a heart for herself, a heart to desire, to grieve, to be wounded, and bewildered. Be honest: Walters had never been beautiful. That meant she had gone through life without the admiration, the excitements, the readily-professed sympathy, the fun and the flattery which girls who are pleasant to look at receive on every hand, breathing in admiration and desire like the free, fresh air, hardly valuing what was so easy to obtain, hardly suspecting that the supply may one day dry up. Walters probably envied her because she was "a lady," because she was young, because she was pretty. Walters was perturbed because Miss Carol had been out of sorts on this of all mornings. Walters would be romantically gratified if Miss Carol married Mister Gerald, because Walters was devoted to Mister Gerald and it was suitable he should have a wife who was young and a lady and pretty. That's my only stock in trade, Carol thought: my looks. And a scrap of intelligence. She had traded on them hard. She had sucked up admiration and hospitality and sympathy. Sympathy! Understanding! She wanted them now, she needed them. And she could not have them because there was no one in the world to whom she

could tell her troubles. Last night it had been different. Last night she had felt there was nothing in the world she could not tell to Emmet O'Donovan. But now it was morning, and she was sensible again, and unsure of herself again, and miserable.

"Feeling better now?" asked Alexander Brind.

She had forgotten him! He was standing by the empty fireplace, coffee cup in hand, smiling down at her. Gravely smiling. Not offensive. Not intrusive.

"I suppose I was looking ghastly before? I felt rotten. Sick. Coffee was just what I needed. May I smoke now?"

He offered his case and lighted her cigarette.

He's a nice old man, she thought, but he wouldn't be half so nice to me if I were plain. Even after a crying fit, a pretty girl still has her hair and her figure.

"You were very unhappy this morning?"

"I still am."

That was foolish; half-way to a confidence.

"But," he said slowly, "you weren't unhappy when you came in last night."

Her cheeks were hot with anger. She was reminded that last night he had noticed, while she was still unaware of it, that her coat and her skirt were tangled with leaves and twigs picked up from the ground. He had said nothing at the time. He had been discreet, merely insisting she should put his raincoat over her shoulders and go straight to her room. But now he was insinuating, probing her thoughts for secrets, demanding an old man's reward for an old man's discretion.

He denied her unspoken indictment. "It's none of my business," he said. "I realise that. But I'll own up. I'd like you to tell me."

"Why?"

"Because I'm vain. I'm sixty years old. That means I've nothing to flatter myself with now, except whatever reputation for wisdom I can beat up among my friends."

"Are you really wise?"

"Not a bit. Experienced, perhaps. By comparison with you. There's no credit in that. Anyone who lives long enough acquires

experience. Still, people have taken my advice before now without coming to disaster."

"You think I need advice?"

"That," he said, "is a question you can answer better than I can. My technique's not good, is it? I keep telling you I'm not inquisitive, but you can see I am. I'm bursting with curiosity. It's a weakness I ought to have overcome long ago."

"Why should you be interested in me?"

"One reason is, you're an exceptionally beautiful young woman. Even at my age that counts. I hope you're not shocked?"

"No, but I thought you were too nice for that."

Brind looked astonished for a moment. Then he laughed.

"I hate talking to you from the elevated platform of my superior age. I'd much rather we treated each other just as two human beings. But I can see I have shocked you. To me it's merely incidental that my hair's grey and my wind short and I get neuralgia in a cold wind. Subconsciously I'm always forgetting how old I am. But it's natural you can't overlook it. Grey hair and sixty years since I was born—in your eyes those are the cardinal facts about me."

"Oh, no, I like you as well."

"But on your own terms. You'd forgive me for being inquisitive about you—but for not giving as the reason the fact that you're beautiful?"

"I'd rather you were interested in me as a person."

"As a matter of fact, I am. Only just as you fix your attention first on my grey hair, I noticed first of all that you're exceptionally lovely."

"That means," said Carol, "you wouldn't have given me a second thought if I'd been plain?"

"Perhaps not. I'd like to think it was otherwise. But I doubt it. That's the way men's minds work. Through their senses. They fall in love. When they are young, I mean. It's only afterwards they learn something quite different—loving."

"I suppose there is a distinction," she admitted.

"A very big one."

"You haven't a very high opinion of falling in love? You don't think it's important?"

"Not unless it leads to love. On the other hand, I don't believe any one can love till they've fallen in love first. Not men, anyhow."

"Isn't it greedy to expect both?"

He did not answer that. Instead he put another question: "What made you say I wouldn't have been interested in you if you hadn't been beautiful? Was it when that maid came in with the coffee?"

"Yes. I've known her ever since I was a kid. She's always been plain. And for the first time, this morning, I was sorry for her."

"Oh, but plain women often marry, and happily too."

"Walters hasn't. And it's not only marrying. I suddenly realised how much I get from life that I've never been grateful for. Things that simply couldn't happen to Walters."

He nodded. "I thought you weren't an ordinary person. See! I am pleased with myself. Grandfatherly conceit! The first time I saw you, in the corridor of that train, when I was going to Carlisle, first I thought you were lovely, then I tried to think you were hard and conventional and spoiled. And then I came to the conclusion you were nothing of the sort. And I was interested. I wanted to know you."

"All before we had spoken a word to each other?"

"I have eyes in my head. And ears. No," he added, seeing her start, "don't be so quick to take offence. I didn't eavesdrop. I didn't hear anything I ought not to have heard."

"Are you really a grandfather?"

"Not even a father."

"You're not married at all?"

"I was. For twenty-three years. And very, very happily. I've been lonely ever since my wife died. That's strange. I've never admitted it to any one else but you. Not in that way. I suppose it's because I'm lonely and beginning to remember my age now and then, that I feel this absurd, romantic and, I assure you, quite harmless interest in you."

She stood up, smiling at him, unaware that for the moment she had forgotten her own cares and perplexities.

"I wanted children," he said. "So did my wife. They would

have been grown-up by now. About your age. By the way, what is your age?"

"Twenty. I shall be twenty-one in February."

"Often I feel I'd like to be young again. But not so young as that. Twenty is a terrible age."

"How?"

"Oh, I'm not so old I can't remember. At twenty you're always changing inside yourself. You're never the same person two days running. Often, not two hours running. You're always making discoveries about yourself, and they never hold good for long. As fast as you get a grip of the world, it changes and dissolves under you. When you're not on the heights, you're in the depths. And anything that isn't a triumph is an abysmal disaster."

"Yes," she said. "That's it. And I know I shan't have the strength. I'm weak. I swither about. I'm always either hesitating or rash. What shall I be like by the time I'm thirty? I'll be worn out."

"Oh, but it doesn't go on like that all your life."

"You mean, you settle down? You grow dull? Resigned?"

He laughed. "It needn't be as bad as that. You can achieve some kind of stability. Enough to enable you to enjoy uncertainty as an occasional change. It's not necessary to lose the sense of rapture—only, it doesn't come so often."

"You would have made a wonderful father," she said.

"So that's what my old man's romance comes down to! Have I been looking on you as a daughter? I dare say I have. And I'd have been very proud. Do you know, on that train, in the corridor, the first time I saw you, there was a boy I thought I'd have liked for a son. A private soldier. He's in your brother's Commando. Your brother was talking about him yesterday. His name's O'Donovan."

He was taken aback by the resentful stare she gave him through narrowed eyes. She was suddenly taller, and more lovely than ever, with her hands tense at her sides, her back arched, her cheeks glowing, her face thinned and solemn and urgent with fury. Somewhere in the remote fortresses of his astonished mind the observation was recorded—with pleasure and approval—that this girl was not all gentleness, complaisance and

vulnerability: she could whip out anger like tensile steel sprung from its clamps.

"So you've been trapping me?" she said. "You knew all the time?"

Even while enlightenment was still illuminating all the past twenty-four hours, he gave her his answer at once.

"No. I knew nothing."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

She relaxed, turned half-way, resting one hand on the mantel over the fireplace.

"But, of course," he said, "I know now. And I'm glad. For both of you."

She swung rapidly on her heel to face him, radiant as if all the young blood in her body were singing joyfully through the flesh.

"I haven't told any one else," she confessed. "Not even my mother. It only happened last night. Quite by chance. It's altered everything. I couldn't tell any one here. They wouldn't understand. But you did. Right away. Isn't that strange?"

"No. I told you I felt from the first we were going to be friends."

Then she altered again, became a different girl, shaken with harsh, hysterical laughter.

"And the only thought I gave you," she said, "was how I could make use of you. I meant to get you to talk and go out with me, so that I shouldn't be left alone with Gerald."

"Oh, yes, Gerald! I had an idea there was a complication somewhere."

She began to tell him her troubles.

CHAPTER 15

Beside the Weir

ALEXANDER BRIND tried hard to help. When Carol announced she was going for a walk immediately luncheon was finished, before any one else could speak he had offered to accompany her. She guessed that he meant to set off by her side and then leave her free, once they were out of sight of the Manor House, to go her own way. He was clever, cleansing his broad brown face of any sign of conspiratorial knowledge, sitting there, benign, determined, apparently obtuse, when her mother and Sir Basil and Lady Scope all turned on his suggestion and put up, one after the other, counter-proposals for the way she should spend her afternoon. Ostensibly they were suggesting remedies for an invalid: Carol was discussed as a guest suffering from the after effects of nervous shock, nothing serious, though distressing to conscientious hosts who had contrived to keep German bombs at a safe distance from their house but not far enough from a girl waywardly choosing the wrong evening to take a moonlight walk.

These pretenses did not deceive her. She knew they had all come to the same conclusion: that Gerald intended to propose marriage to her on this Sunday afternoon, and that she was making panic-stricken maidenly efforts to avoid at the last moment what in her heart she eagerly desired. They considered it their duty, in mature, far-sighted kindness, to prevent her escaping Gerald, and they all believed that afterwards she would—though not in so many words—thank them for their present officiousness. Even her brother, David, who had no finesse and rarely understood anything till it was put to him in direct speech, seemed to be aware that an oblique conflict of

wills was going on around him. He showed his uneasiness by being rude to Brind, but Brind affected to notice nothing untoward anywhere. Brind understood the situation as well as she did, but as no one dared to say outright that they were planning to leave Carol alone for a momentous interview with the son of the house, he held fast to the pretence. The girl was a bit off colour, needed fresh air, and of her good nature had accepted the proffered escort for her afternoon walk of a sixty-year-old fellow-guest. Brind could be beautifully, blandly obstinate, and she admired him for it. He was her ally, her counsellor, her source of strength, her deliverance from her own weakness, and he pointed her the joyful way to her true lover.

Then, when the victory was won, when she was in the hall with Brind, and they had left behind them in the drawing-room five thwarted people, tongue-tied by their own consternation, Carol changed her mind. She did not know she was going to do it, till the words were spoken.

"Look," she said. Her ally stood opposite her, hat in hand, twirling an ashplant walking-stick: it was a young man's gesture, a youthful flamboyance which revealed that he was enjoying the conspiracy and the victory. "Look. Do you mind very much if I ditch you?"

The phrase puzzled him for a moment. Then he laughed. "But of course I'm going to clear off after ten minutes. You didn't really think I meant to inflict myself on you?"

"No, it's not that. You've been a dear. You've been wonderful. But I see now I must talk to Gerald first."

Brind said nothing, merely giving her a shrewd, inquiring look.

"You don't understand," she cried impatiently. "I know I said I was indecisive. But that's all over now. I'm never going back to all that shilly-shallying. Only I must speak to Gerald before I go. If I don't, he'll be planning to get me alone this evening."

"Which would be very embarrassing?"

She stamped her foot.

"You're not nearly such a wise old man as you think. Can't you see I must be square with Gerald before . . . I'd feel horrid

if I didn't. I've never said anything to make him think I would marry him. But then I haven't said anything to make him think the opposite. And I must. Right now. It's only fair. It's the least I can do."

Brind's smile, she thought, was very sweet.

"I've been acting stupid so whole-heartedly," he said, "I must have become stupid. Forgive me. Good-bye now. And good luck."

She watched him go out alone and stood thinking about him for a few minutes. He was far from stupid; his intuitions sprang ahead to understand her, even though she had had to explain this last unforeseen impulse. As he went out, he looked lonely, no longer twirling his stick, carrying it soberly at his side. His wife was dead—she must have loved him very much!—and he had no children. He was lonely and all his kindness, his tact and delicate understanding were wasted. No, not wasted. He had come casually into her life, and strengthened her, preserved her from an emotional disaster, shown her the way she longed to go, and wished her godspeed. No father could have given his daughter better counsel, stronger succour. Her own father, had he lived to be with her now, would have fallen, she knew, far short of what this stranger achieved for her. Alexander Brind, she decided, was an exceptional man. He was rare, fine, trustworthy, a delight to know. He was fit for a woman to live with. You could not say that of many men. But you could of Emmet O'Donovan, who was in addition young, and good to look at, and brave, and who loved her. Her heart, dismissing the sixty-year-old, sang to the thought of her lover.

But first she had a duty to discharge. And time was flying.

She went to the drawing-room and opened the door. Five heads looked up.

"I haven't gone yet," she said, bright, cheerful, sure of herself, untouched, untouchable. "Gerald, I wondered if you could spare me a minute or two?"

Gerald was on his feet at once. He even forgot his crippled arm, trying to lever himself out of the arm-chair with a helpless hand before he remembered to put his weight on the other.

Damn! she thought. That was the wrong way to go about it.

Her mother and the Scopes, and David too, were smiling at her fondly, approvingly, all of them looking a little absurd. They had a talent for leaping to the wrong conclusions. And Gerald would think . . . that must be put to rights at once!

"Walk with me part of the way," she suggested, as he closed the door behind him. "I can't talk here."

"I wanted to come," he said, his plump face earnest, and to her pathetic. "Only you seemed to have your walk all fixed up."

He looked round the hall, as if expecting to see Brind.

"I got rid of him," she explained, remorselessly off-hand. They went outdoors. "And, Gerald, I shan't keep you more than a few minutes. I really do want to go for this walk alone." *

He gave her the tiniest, briefest bow. This was his father's house, in effect, his house, and he was her host. Courtesy made him regard her wishes as law. It was a good setting for him, too, this long drive of yellow gravel winding between the shrubberies away from the white stuccoed walls and pillars. Out of uniform to-day, he had an unconscious air of proprietorship, a deep-sunk, unquestionable dignity, not graceful but solid, abiding. Some other woman, with more stability than herself, would value Gerald and accept him in an ample patrician gesture. For Carol he was now no more than part of an old-fashioned picture—portrait of a landed young gentleman on his estate: a good picture, but not for her. Yet, because she had an eye for colour and composition, she drew an æsthetic satisfaction from walking beside him: he was bareheaded and he wore a not very new lounge suit of brown, a fine cloth with a faint arrowhead pattern and tiny specklings of crimson silk in the weave. Expensive cloth, she thought, and expensively cut to a casual perfection: her lover would never possess such a suit, nor, possessing it, would he be able to wear it like Gerald. Once she had cared about such things. But that seemed a long time ago.

How on earth was she to tell Gerald to waste no more time on her! He had made his intention plain, but never in words. To fetch her message out, stark and blunt, would embarrass him and expose herself to rebuke. Then, as if he feared he would never again be given the opportunity (or did he, like those scheming idiots back in the drawing-room, imagine that she

had asked him out here for this purpose?), he who was never impulsive began to snatch suddenly at words of formal courtship.

"Carol," he said, in a misery of diffidence, "you must know I'm fond of you. Very fond of you. In fact, I love you. I want to ask——"

Cutting him short with an urgent, peremptory "No!" she saw shock flicker in his eyes. But he kept his dignity.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"Oh," she cried. "You haven't. How could you?"

"Then——"

"No," she cried. "You don't love me. What you said first was the truth. You're fond of me. And I'm fond of you. But no more than that. No more than that for either of us."

He grasped at this as a concession. "We needn't quibble over words," he urged. "You say you're fond of me. That's more than I dared hope for."

"No. You don't understand. There's someone else. Someone I really love."

"Another man?"

He was stupefied. He had to have everything repeated and underlined. Normally he was not slow-witted. She must have hurt him deeply. But if he needed confirmation he must have it.

"Yes. Another man. I'm going to meet him now."

"I see."

He stood for a moment looking down at the rolled yellow gravel and the toes of his polished brown shoes, slender and elegant.

At last: "I suppose I've made a fool of myself?"

She shook her head. "You've been terribly sweet." Then she took a risk. "It was my fault, I expect. Only you see, Gerald, I didn't know till—till it happened. It happened quite suddenly. That's what it's like, falling in love. It really takes your breath away. And it changes everything."

"I hope he's good enough for you."

That was a charming thing to say. She was flattered, and laughed with delight. "What troubles me is whether I'm good enough for him."

"Is it any one I know?"

"No. Nobody knows him. He's all my own discovery. And don't tell any one. This is confidential. On your honour. Don't say a word to anybody. Now I must fly. Oh, Gerald, when it happens to you, when you really fall in love, I hope you'll be as happy as I am."

As if any one could ever be so happy! But Gerald was kind and gentle and deserved a wife who would appreciate him.

He astounded her then by taking her hand in his, raising it, and kissing the back of her fingers. That made her remember the first evening of this week-end when he had held her hand for a second, without speaking, and she had let him look into her eyes and imagine he could read there whatever assurances he pleased. Beyond a doubt she had misled him, and he had a right to consider her treacherous, mean, selfish, callous. Instead of which he made no complaint, merely kissed her hand and murmured a congratulation, a wish for her happiness.

She tore herself away, the blood stinging hot in her cheeks. She did not look back, but as she went out through the open gateway, she knew that he was standing there, watching her hasten to meet her lover.

Half-way down the hill she glanced at her watch and saw it already showed a few minutes after three. She would be late! She was keeping Emmet waiting! As she hurried on, running as often as she walked, she recalled the mood into which for a time she had chilled after waking that morning, the mood that had impelled her to believe her lover light-minded, to believe that he would not keep the rendezvous at the weir, to believe all kinds of wicked things about him; even to believe that she could leave him. Penitent, she chided herself, as she hurried on, for all those secret misgivings, those suspicions and betrayals and base imaginings, never carried into word or deed, but vile nevertheless. She would atone for them. She would obliterate them all by her love for Emmet.

Through the village she hastened, across the footbridge over the river, leaving the mill on the far bank, and then past osier beds and tangled brambles, along the narrow path across the water meadows to where already she could hear the weir boom-

ing. Then it was that, while her eager heart still beat fast to the impetuous tunes of delight and expectation, there also played like summer lightnings across her mind remembered forebodings—and all to no purpose. It was in vain she strove to slow her pace, reminding herself of sober warnings given by Alexander Brind after she had owned, proud and reckless, to her love for a boy she scarcely knew. What did she know of Emmet? Was it not the height and depth of foolishness to rear all her trust on the flimsy foundation of a few words exchanged in a train corridor and an hour of love-making under a hawthorn-bush! Less than an hour, because for long enough they had been shy of each other, circumspect, impersonal. But for the chancy downfall of German bombs in a wood, due to a frightened or incompetent pilot, she might never have gone into Emmet's arms, never have received and returned his kisses. All her behaviour, last night, this morning, and now, was unwise, irrational, feverishly bred out of irresponsible impulses. What had she in common with this boy, of whom, before yesterday, she knew nothing? Of whom, indeed, she knew little more now except that he had kissed her and spoken to her of love. She and Emmet were held together by the frailest, most insubstantial bonds, the liking of the eye, the stir of the blood, the pleasure of the senses. And what kind of a strange, immodest, inconsistent girl was it who, doubting and half-hearted, had brought herself to the point of contemplating marriage with one man, and within a few hours courted the kisses of another? Bad enough to have started this fantastic love affair, but to continue it—to hurry with urgent feet to continue it, as she was doing!—that was mad, reckless, an invitation to disaster. What must Emmet think of a girl who gave him her lips the first time they were alone together, and the next day came running, hot and dishevelled, to renew the experience? But he was her darling. He would never misunderstand. He matched her heart and body and spirit, and the long lapse of years could not teach her to trust him more absolutely than now.

There was the truth! It would be the truth, if only he had kept faith, if only he were there, by the weir gate, waiting for her? The river bank was cut in a wide inlet, so that she had to skirt

the bush-grown clay sides above the brown pool into which the cascade fell, sliding smooth and translucently green over the stone barrage, tumbling to the foot in a furious swirl of white foam, and filling the air with a loud, sustained reverberation. Now she could see the narrow plank bridge, railed on one side, which spanned the river above the weir, and the wicket gate at the near end, shadowed by willow-trees—and there was no one there! Her feet faltered to a standstill. But the next moment Emmet came out from the shadow, taller in his khaki battle-dress than she had remembered him, tall and slender and strong, and there was joy in his face. She did not know that joy gleamed in her own eyes and trembled on her lips, responsive to his. She knew only that he had not failed her. He was her darling, and she forgot that she had ever doubted him or doubted herself.

He held something in his hand, a roll of white paper, and when she pulled out of his embrace and straightened her hat, which he had tilted back on her head, she said: "What's that?"

"I'll show you later on, if you like. People come here. Let's walk."

It was over, this first hazardous encounter face to face since they became sweethearts, and they were not shy with each other; they were not as strangers. That was a triumph, and her heart chimed to it. Her old life was cast far behind her, these two days: the new life was better, wider, richer, in every way superior. She chattered lest exultation overwhelm her.

"I was late, and I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. I'm not really like that. I'm not unpunctual by nature. And I'm not the sort of girl who comes late deliberately. Emmet, did you think I was never coming?"

"I'd have waited if you'd been hours late."

"Oh, but you mustn't. You mustn't spoil me. But it's sweet of you to say that."

"I meant it. I love you. And I didn't dare believe you would really come—till you did."

Elated by power and pride, she flirted with him while they walked through the fields beside the river, smiling as she spoke, looking at him, and looking away, and then looking at him

again. It was a pleasure the more heady because he almost always gave serious answers to her frivolities.

"You don't mind wasting an afternoon with me?"

He repudiated the word "wasting."

"I didn't really expect to find you at the weir, you know. I'm supposed to be taking a walk by myself, and it was only by chance I came this way."

He might have answered teasing with teasing, and reminded her that she had come running to the tryst. Instead: "But I promised I'd be there," he said.

"Do you always keep your promises?"

Still he would not lighten his mood. He said earnestly: "Yes, I do. And I love you and I want you to marry me."

"You mean, you want me to promise——?"

"No. I'll do the promising. I don't ask you to do or say anything you don't want to. But you must understand, right from the beginning. . . ."

He was so earnest it was impossible not to tease him.

"The beginning of what?"

"The beginning of all this between you and me. You must understand I want to marry you and I mean to marry you."

This was her lover whom she had wronged in her weak and doubting heart, imagining that he would judge her, because of last night, a girl facile and easy in love.

"But you're so young," she said. "How can you be certain?"

"It's not necessary to argue with feelings like mine. Yes, I'm young, I suppose. But if I'm old enough for war, I'm old enough to know my own mind."

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

He was as young as that!

"I'm twenty," she said. "I'll be twenty-one in February. I'm a year older than you. Are you shocked?"

"Idiot!"

He would have kissed her then, but she saw a punt coming down the river, rounding an eyot, and she drew back.

"Just the same," he said, "there's a lot we ought to talk about. Seriously."

"For example?"

"Well, two obstacles you've got to face. One, I'm not your class."

"Class!" she repeated, making a mouth. "What an old-fashioned way of talking! As if that mattered!"

"It does to some people."

"There'll be none of that snobbery left after the war."

"I'm not so sure. And secondly, I've got no money."

"Neither have I."

The idea amused her. He waited, straight-faced, till she stopped laughing.

"When I say I've got no money," he explained, "I mean it almost literally. I have a hundred and fifteen pounds nine and threepence in the bank. And when my mother grows old, or falls ill, I must look after her."

He told her that his mother was a schoolmistress, born in Donegal, now teaching in a secondary school evacuated out of London. That at least placed him for her, gave him a background, and some substance of his own. She treasured for another reason every scrap of information he gave her about himself: it built a solid footing under her own future. She saw herself taken out of economic shelter and, at Emmet's side, at last free to encounter life as most other people knew it. She exulted in the prospect.

"Your father's dead? So's mine. Long ago. That's something we have in common."

"It won't help us," he said, "to eat and keep a roof over our heads."

"But lots of people are poor," she objected. "And still they get married."

"You don't know what poverty is. You've never had to eat cheap food, and wear cheap clothes, and live in a little house, and have no maid and no car, and watch every penny you spend."

This made her angry.

"I know what's the matter," she flashed at him. "You think I'm a coward?"

"No. If you'd been a coward, you wouldn't have come to the

weir this afternoon. But you don't know what you're letting yourself in for."

"Are you trying to put me off? Are you trying to persuade me not to marry you?" Irrelevantly she added: "Anyhow, we can't get married till the war's over."

He agreed with that. "It wouldn't be fair to you."

"Why not?"

Surprised, he exclaimed: "I might be killed almost any day. Or wounded so that I'd be crippled for life."

"That wouldn't keep me from marrying you," she said scornfully. And then, suddenly tender: "But, darling, take care of yourself, when you go on those raids. For my sake."

His eyes told her he was loving her.

"Anyhow," she said, "you'll be out of danger for a bit now. They won't send you away for months, will they? Not after that raid on Norway. Where was it? I've forgotten the name."

"Torgsdal. It was cushy. I hardly had a bullet near me."

"But you did awfully well. It was you who saved the situation, wasn't it?"

"Who told you that? Your brother?"

She nodded.

"That's another difficulty," he said. "Your brother. He won't like it, you know."

"It's none of his business."

"I wish I was older. I wish the blasted war was won. I wish I was free and making money."

"Do you want to make money? It doesn't sound like you to want to be rich."

"I want to earn enough to be independent. I must. No, I don't want to be rich. But I want to be free. I want to give you that, anyhow—freedom from poverty."

"It's queer," she said. "I know practically nothing about you. I don't even know what your work is."

"I'm a painter," he said. "At least, I'm going to be. But I had to work in an advertising agency. Commercial art, it's called. Since I was sixteen. Do you know who I worked for? The man you're staying with. He's chairman of the company. I don't

suppose he'd even remember my face or my name, any more than he'd know a good drawing from a bad one."

"Do you hate him?" Sir Basil! Emmet would know Gerald too, but she did not mention that.

"Good lord, no. There are plenty worse. But he's just a business man. I'm an artist."

Surprised, she heard a new note in Emmet's voice, and did not recognise it for the ancient hostility of the creative mind towards the administrative.

"I was getting five pounds a week when I joined the army. It seemed quite a lot then. I was proud of myself."

"So you ought to be. It's more than I ever earned."

"I shall make a lot more when the war's over, when I go back. And I'll be worth it."

"Do you talk like that to every one?"

"Not to any one else in the world. I know how to keep my mouth shut. But with you it's different. I can tell you all that's in my heart."

Loving him for that confession, she still teased him, accusing him roundly of conceit.

He did not deny it. "I know my abilities," he said. "I'd be a fool if I didn't. I'm good at design and colour. I can be slick and adaptable. One part of me can. That's useful in advertising. It will earn me high fees. I was only just beginning to discover my market value when I joined up. But I don't over-estimate that sort of thing. I can do it, that's all, and do it well. It's not my real work, though."

He told her that his ambition was to paint, to paint what he wished, not what business men needed to help sell their goods, and to go on painting till he learned to produce what satisfied him. "If I weren't poor," he said, "I'd like to put in years at art schools. I've got any amount to learn. Only I must go my own way. I must take what I need from others and discover the rest for myself. I can. I must."

He was cocksure, but only in certain ways. Just as he was confident of his ability to be a good soldier among soldiers, a little different from the others, a little better, so he was convinced that as long as he wished he would be able to earn fees

well above the average for his advertising designs. He respected the means, the technique, but had no very high opinion of the end.

"I know the dangers," he said. "Lots of men in advertising think they might have been first-class painters. They see themselves as Picasso or John or Matisse—if circumstances had been different. They paint less and less, and talk more and more. Just as lots of copywriters are always about to write a great novel. Only they never do. But I'm not like that. I know what I'm out after. I'm going to use advertising, not be used by it."

When he said that, his face was dynamic with will-power and ambition. An older woman might have felt compassion or amusement: but Carol was thrilled. She wanted him to be a man apart, and her pride in him was not affected by his youthful vanity. She realised, besides, that towards what he called "real painting," and towards his love for her, he was humble. There he only wanted to learn, to serve, to spend himself without stint. She loved him for it.

"But all this," he said suddenly, "belongs to the future. I know I can do it. But you—you'll have to take me on trust. And as I told you, I've nothing to offer you now."

In a second or two he could switch from arrogance to the extremes of self-depreciation!

"You've got yourself," she told him gravely. "That's more than enough for me. Let's be content with love, and leave marriage and money to the future."

The roll of white paper in his hand, she realised now, was a collection of his drawings. She demanded to see them. He did not demur, but insisted they should first sit down. They walked up the grass slope of the river bank to find a stile in the fence.

As she opened the papers, he asked: "You don't know anything about art, do you?"

"Not much."

"Well, I warn you, you may not realise how good these are."

He said it so solemnly, she burst out laughing.

But he went on, undisturbed: "I mean, they're rough. Most of them haven't come off. And those that have, that's because I've tried something too easy. I ought not to be good yet. Not perfect.

If I were, I'd have nothing to learn. I'd have reached my limits."

Most of the sketches were in charcoal. She looked at a river-side landscape, seen through a tall window; three drawings of mountains under snow; a head of a sailor in a duffle coat with updrawn hood; a soldier sprawled on the ground with a machine-gun; a bare hand and forearm with blood dripping from a cut; a head of a girl; a group of leafless trees. He was right. She could see the drawings were competent, assured, but she did not know if they were merely good, very good, or exceptionally good. And it was only at the second inspection she realised the girl in the drawing was herself.

"I did that from memory," he explained. "This morning. It's not right. Look at the mouth. Besides, the proportion's wrong. And it doesn't cohere. It's all bits, flying apart. I can't draw you. I'm not detached enough."

She was pleased by his words, but the drawings left her disappointed and perplexed. He seemed to think it was the drawing of herself which made her dissatisfied.

"I know it's not right," he said. "I shouldn't have let you see it."

"It's not a likeness. But it's good, considering you'd only seen me twice. Oh dear, isn't it strange? This is only the third time we've met."

"That's no excuse for making a bad drawing. But it upsets me even to think of you. You're not a subject," he said. "You're——"

"What am I?"

"You're Carol. You've crept into every little corner of my life. I can't reduce you to paper. All this time since you came to the weir, I've been trying to watch you, to learn you, to absorb what you look like into my eyes and my mind. And it's no good. I just can't."

"Must you always draw me from memory?"

He leaped at the implication.

"You'll sit for me? We'll arrange it. I won't draw. I'll use oils and canvas. Oh, I'll show you then what I can do."

"But I must go back to London to-morrow."

His face grew bleak with sudden dismay, but he determined to sweep this new obstacle aside.

"You'll come again. Besides, it's not far, thank God. Or else I'll get week-end leave, and come to London."

They became almost practical. She gave him the address of her headquarters, off Victoria Street, where she worked and ate and slept. He insisted on having the telephone number also. She copied his regimental number into her address book. Then she asked his permission to take the drawings away with her, promising to return them within a few days.

He was very offhand about that.

"Keep them. Tear them up. That's what I shall do if you send them back. I've got to do far better than that. The trouble is, the army takes the feel out of my fingers. They're getting rough and clumsy."

She spread them out on her knee. They were brown and rough-skinned, but clean: long, thin, agile, clever fingers, with fine dark hairs springing from the backs. They had broad oval nails, and strangely blunt tips, slightly splayed. She could feel the strong pads of muscle round the thumbs and at the wrists. And still she did not know whether he deceived himself, whether his potential ability was as great as he believed or whether he was just a craftsman of conventional skill dreaming of what he would never realise. Either way, she loved him.

They put off their parting minute by minute, till half an hour and then an hour had gone by since they began to say farewell. At the end, she said: "But we shall see each other in a week. If you can't come to London, I'll come here. I'll stay at the hotel. I promise."

Even then he was only half-consolated. "A week's a long time."

Disclosures

RETURNING to the Manor House, Carol compelled herself by an effort of will to face external realities far less important to her than her love for Emmet, but now more urgent, more difficult, more distressing. An instinct so powerful that she did not even pause to question it bade her guard her secret from others until she had found ways and means to lift an idyll, intact, secure, with none of its precious iridescence lost, into the public view. The time would come when she and Emmet would be able to confront boldly, as acknowledged lovers, such of the world as was interested in them, but at present she saw that secrecy was their strength. Gerald Scope knew that she loved another man, but had no suspicion whom she had preferred to him. Alexander Brind knew a little more: he knew the name of her lover, and that she had met him last night and again this afternoon. Brind was on her side. The others, her mother, her brother, Sir Basil and Lady Scope, knew nothing and, because Gerald was not the sort to clamour his disappointment here and there, they would suspect nothing.

But after what had happened, she realised, there would be no more Manor House visits for her. Gerald, questioned (he would surely be questioned), would either have to say he had proposed and been turned down, or else let them presume he had changed his mind. One way or the other she would not be asked to the Manor House again. After a time her mother might go, and David on his leaves, but it would be an awkward situation for them. They enjoyed the spacious comforts, the unobtrusive luxuries of the Manor House, and after this there would

always be a hidden flaw in their visits: and it would give them a grudge against her. She told herself that all this was her fault: she should not have accepted Lady Scope's invitation. But then, had she not been here this week-end, she might never have met Emmet again. He and she might have gone through the rest of their lives separately, lacking all that now made them so rich. Because of that she could feel no remorse, and, if others had to be deceived and disappointed, she was sorry, but not deeply concerned. Emmet had given her good gifts besides his love: freedom, and a purpose in life, deliverance from her weak submissions to circumstance, a prospect of the future which a few days ago she would have regarded as unbelievably hard and austere but now was bright and proud, precious, to be fought for with all her new-found strength.

The beginning of that fight confronted her now: she had to pass the coming evening at the Manor House with dignity and courtesy, guarding her own secret, ignoring the certain awareness of the others that between her and Gerald what had been expected was not occurring at all. In the morning she would hurry back to London by the early train, and she need never come to stay at the Manor House again. Meanwhile she must defend herself as best she could. Gerald would do nothing to make things more difficult for her. Brind was her secret ally. The others were now her undeclared enemies, because she had refused to make over her life to their plane: but at least they were bred to standards of reticence and decency: they would not attempt to drag out into the open what belonged to the privacy of her heart. Her task was to hold fast and let the next few hours flow by her, harmlessly. Next morning she would be away, a free woman, a woman loved and loving, whose inward security no other person could trouble.

These were her plans and they filled her with pride in her new resolution. When they had to be cast aside, at a moment's notice, the resolution remained: it took on a crusading fierceness, an angry impetus which emptied her mind of all care for her own comfort. She was maturing hour by hour in great unforeseen leaps of self-discovery.

Brind had news for her, news which overwhelmed her with a

tempest of tender indignation. When she came out of her room, prepared to meet the others, over a Sunday evening cold supper, with a defensive screen of small talk, the journalist was waiting for her at the top of the great staircase.

"I might not get another chance to speak to you alone," he explained. "And it would be better if you heard it from me. But perhaps you know already?"

He could be speaking only of Emmet. She feared innumerable catastrophes.

"What is it? I know nothing."

"Your brother let it out casually just now."

"Does he know—about Emmet and me?"

Brind shook his head.

"No. If he knew, he'd have said nothing at all. Or said it differently. Listen. The boy's in trouble. Last night, when the alert was on, he was missing from duty. That field exercise. He ought to have reported with the others at once, and he didn't. Not till more than an hour afterwards."

"Yes," she said. "That was my fault. Did you guess?"

The older man nodded.

"He was put under open arrest. He comes up for trial to-morrow."

"You mean a court-martial? They don't dare to call him a deserter?"

"Good lord, no. It's not as serious as that. He might get C.B.—confined to barracks, or extra fatigues."

"But it was all my fault."

"That's not the worst. He was put under open arrest last night. That means, unless he was ordered away on duty, he should have stayed in his billet or within a hundred yards of it. And he didn't. This afternoon he was missing. So far as your brother knows, he's still missing."

"He'll be back by now. He's not a deserter. They ought to know that."

"Absentee is the word."

"It it very serious?"

"Pretty serious."

"What can they do to him?"

"It depends very much on who tries the case."

"David?"

"He may pass it on to the colonel. The punishment might be more C.B. and loss of pay, or it might be detention in a military prison."

"Prison! They wouldn't dare! Emmet's a volunteer. He joined the army a year before he needed to. Then he volunteered for the Commandos. Besides, they know he did splendidly on that Norwegian raid."

"They'll take all that into account," said Brind. "If your brother holds a serious view of it, he may ask for the boy to be sent back to his regiment. That's supposed to be the worst that can happen to a commando man."

"You mean, he'd just be in the ordinary infantry again? Then he wouldn't have to go on raids? Then he wouldn't be in danger?"

"Unless the regiment was ordered abroad," Brind reminded her. "Besides, you must realise he'd consider it a disgrace to be dismissed from the Commando. Nothing could hurt him more."

"And it's all my fault. You know he was with me this afternoon, as well as last night? But I didn't know he was under—what do you call it?"

"Open arrest."

"He didn't say a word. Why did he come? I'd have understood. And if he did come, why couldn't he tell me?"

"Because he didn't want to distress you. It shows, at any rate——"

"What does it show?" Carol demanded.

"That he loves you."

She seized on that. "Yes, it does, doesn't it? Though, of course, I knew it before. But he ought not to have come. I'd have understood."

Of course O'Donovan had to keep the tryst, Brind thought. He was a private soldier, an almost anonymous digit in the lowest layer of the army, with his rights defined but circumscribed by military law, able to get along smoothly so long as he kept the rules, but due for punishment, also defined and circumscribed, if he disobeyed orders. The machine worked only

by regulations. A boy in the first flush of love could not always be expected to slide and spin under propulsion, like part of a machine. Emmet O'Donovan had chosen, twice, between military duty and his love for Carol: once when he ignored the recall signals whistling through the night, and once, this afternoon, when, more deliberately, he heightened the offence by breaking open arrest.

"He knew what he was doing," Brind told the girl, as she leaned, troubled, anxious, young and lovely, with her back to the balustrade at the top of the staircase, her hands outstretched along the bronze railing. "He knew he'd be punished. Evidently he thought it well worth while."

"But he ought to have told me."

"How could he? It would have been like asking for sympathy, or praise."

The boy was proud. And romantic too: it would appeal to him to suffer for the sake of the girl he loved, like something out of an old song, a pre-Raphaelite picture, a William Morris poem. To invite punishment, to take it silently, to bite on it, and despise it as nothing, because it was incurred for the sake of love—there was no denying the allure of all this to a boy not yet twenty. And useless to try to explain the realities of the case to a girl, also young and foolish, as head over heels in love as the boy, and if it came to it, probably just as romantic, just as ready to defy the adult, iron-bound world which neither of them yet understood.

"If he had only told me," she said, "I'd have gone back with him and taken the blame. Then they couldn't have done anything, could they?"

"You mean, because Captain Blanchard is your brother? It would have made things awkward, certainly. But I thought you didn't want any one to know about you and——?"

"I didn't!" she interrupted. "But now it's different. Now I know what I must do."

She ran past him down the stairs with a swirl of flared skirt, her golden head held high. Once she had seemed to Brind a little too thin for perfect beauty as he conceived it: too fine in bone, too insubstantial in figure, too transparent in com-

plexion, delicate, tentative in manner, a girl not yet sure what inheritance womanhood would bring her. And now he had just seen her fly off, impulsive, imperious, on an instant's decision, a grown woman confident in beauty and love, gone to tilt chivalrously in her lover's behalf against the leaguered mischiefs of an unromantic world. Alexander Brind shook his head and followed slowly.

By the time he entered the drawing-room Carol had already produced consternation. He guessed she had forbidden her brother, point blank, in front of the three Scopes and her mother, to harm in any way a young soldier under his command, a trooper called Emmet O'Donovan.

She had marched—oh, yes, beyond a doubt marched was the word—straight to the fireplace and was standing there now, facing the big room and the windows overlooking the terrace and the sloping lawns, facing her brother. The others were grouped in an irregular semicircle on either side of him, all with cocktail glasses in hand, not drinking, not smoking, staring at her. The girl had certainly taken the initiative. They were so intent that no one turned as Brind entered the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

"But what has it to do with you?" David Blanchard asked.

And Sir Basil said: "O'Donovan! That's an Irish name. I knew someone called O'Donovan once."

"You're thinking of the office," his son told him. "We had a youngster in the studio called O'Donovan. He was quite promising."

"It's the same one," said Carol. "Didn't you know he was in David's Commando?"

"Such a lot of our young men are in the Services now. I can't say I remember him exactly, but I'm sorry he's in trouble. Still, discipline, you know, discipline."

"Did you really think," David asked, "I could let the young blighter off just because he'd once worked for Sir Basil?"

"No. It's because I'm the one who's to blame. Because he was with me when he ought to have been on duty. To-day as well as yesterday."

There were so many exclamations that no single one could

be disentangled from the rest: all that they conveyed was bewilderment and incredulity. But Brind, watching Carol with a rueful admiration, knew that the forces she was defying would soon rally against her.

Sir Basil looked completely horrified: he could not bring together in his mind two such remote conceptions as a junior and obscure employee from his advertising agency and the daughter of an old friend, a lady, a girl, moreover, whom he had designed to be wife to his only son. Lady Scope was deeply offended: she pinched her nostrils as at the scent of treachery. David Blanchard remained blank-faced, and his mother moved to his side, as if to quicken his apprehensions, and also as if she thought she would need support presently.

"Carol, you don't know what you're saying. You must be ill."

"I'm perfectly well, mother."

Gerald Scope was the first to recover any normal ease of manner. He lifted his glass, drank, and put the glass down again as though the cocktail had been bitter and he was glad of the finality of draining it. In his eyes alone was there any sympathy for Carol: yet, as Brind reminded himself, he was the odd man out, the rejected suitor. Except Gerald they were all emotionally shocked away from the protective assurances of convention, habit, even of breeding. Something beyond the ordinary scope of belief, something of the sort which they felt ought to be confined to other people, to whispered rumours and hinted scandal, had struck directly at their self-esteem and left them naked, merely human.

"Are you telling me," David demanded, "you've been——" he worked his handsome jaws while he searched for a word —— "been out with one of my men?"

"Yes, I have."

"You must be crazy!"

"I love him," said Carol with the utmost simplicity. "And he loves me. I'm going to marry him."

Mrs. Blanchard began to sob, and then Lady Scope became aware of her other guest, standing unregarded at the door.

"Oh dear! Mr. Brind, this must be very unpleasant for you."

We had no idea anything like this was going to happen. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to leave us for a moment?"

He bowed.

"I'm sure we can count on your discretion, Brind," said Sir Basil. "Most unfortunate. Most unfortunate."

But Carol would not have it. "I'd like Mr. Brind to stay. He's my friend. I know you're all going to be beastly to me."

Weeping now, her mother said: "It's this war work. Being in London all through the blitz. It must have upset her nerves. She's been quite strange lately. Only I never thought you'd do anything like this, Carol. It's so vulgar!"

The girl's temper flashed like gunpowder at that word. "How dare you! What's between Emmet and me is fine, good, beautiful. I'm proud of it. It's the best thing that's ever happened in my life."

Her brother by this time understood a little better. "Look here," he said, "you're not really thinking of marrying this chap, are you?"

"Of course I am."

"But damn it, he's not—well, for want of a better word, he's not a gentleman. Being in the ranks doesn't matter so much nowadays, with a war on. But after all, what is he? A clerk in an advertising agency."

Gerald put in a word at last. "O'Donovan's a commercial artist, as a matter of fact. And a very good one. After the war he'll probably earn a bigger income than you."

Gerald flushed as soon as he had said that, realising that David might think he was being taunted with poverty, so he added hurriedly: "What I mean is, if Carol really wants to marry this chap, there's no good reason why she shouldn't. What we call gentlemen are going to be fewer and fewer. The world's changing."

"Mr. Brind," Carol said, "you agree with that, don't you?"

"Certainly. I know Mr. O'Donovan only slightly. But I'd like to assure Mrs. Blanchard that if she's imagining any hobbledoy she's very much mistaken."

"Anyhow," said Gerald, "it's none of our business."

Carol seized on this admission. With the unconscious arro-

gance of youth she told her mother and her brother that they were making a ridiculous fuss about nothing. What she proposed to do might have been startling in the Victorian age, but was not at all out of the way in 1941. If they were shocked, it was because they were behind the times. And anyhow, she had made up her mind, and had no intention of changing it.

Sir Basil and his wife exchanged glances and, as Brind read them, they were deciding that things might have been worse, that if this was the sort of girl Gerald had chosen to be his wife it was just as well she had elected for another man. They were recovering their customary poise; but David could not let well alone.

"All very well," he grumbled, "to say it's none of our business, but it was Carol who started it. And why she had to blurt out that sort of thing in front of you all I can't imagine."

"I'll tell you why. It was because I felt I was here on false pretences, and I couldn't bear it any longer. Besides, I knew that if I tackled David in front of every one, he'd be more likely to do what I wanted."

Seeing her brother frowning, she explained: "Emmet's in trouble because I kept him when he should have gone back to duty, and because, when you put him under open arrest, he came to meet me. He'd promised, you see, and he felt he had to keep his promise. If any one's to be punished, it ought to be me."

"Nonsense. You're not under military law. He is."

"Just the same, if you do punish him, I shall write to your colonel and tell him the whole story."

Blackmail! The girl had no scruples at all when it came to defending her lover. And Brind, watching, admired her for it.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"You'll find that I would. Better be sensible, David."

"We don't want any scandal, after all," said Sir Basil.

Brind intervened. "As I remember King's Regulations, Captain Blanchard can perfectly well administer a simple reprimand for this offence. It can't be overlooked, of course," he explained to Carol. "A reprimand means no real punishment. I'd advise you to be satisfied with that."

"It seems to be the best way out," Sir Basil admitted. "I always believe in compromise."

So Carol had her way.

Over supper they talked only of impersonal matters. It was an uncomfortable meal, however, and just before it finished, David Blanchard was called to the telephone.

When he came back, he said: "Sorry. I've got to leave and get into uniform. Orders. In fact, I'll have to say good-bye. We leave the village in two hours."

"All of you? The whole Commando?"

He nodded.

"Where are you going?" his mother asked. "Oh dear, what a terrible evening it's been. David, you're not going to another raid?"

He laughed. "I don't suppose so for a minute. I don't know where we're bound for, and if I did I wouldn't tell you. Just a change of billets, I expect."

Obviously he was glad to go. The Manor House could never be the same haven for him again. Or for his mother. Carol at last felt a touch of remorse: not that she would have undone what she had done.

She made an excuse, later on, to go upstairs. Seeing Emmet's drawings on her dressing-table, she took them down and gave them to Alexander Brind.

"Find someone who knows about these things," she said. "And tell me how good they are. I want to know."

He did not ask who had made the drawings: all her thoughts and words now centered on Emmet O'Donovan.

Presently she put on a raincoat and went out, without concealment or prevarication this time. They all knew she was going to seek her lover among a crowd of soldiers moving away to an unknown destination, to tell him she had fought for him and fought successfully, and—if they could find an untenanted corner of the night's darkness—to stand in his arms for a moment or two, close to him, sharing heartsick kisses of farewell, like any common girl parting from any common soldier in the black-out.

CHAPTER 17

Colonel's Address

THE sudden move displeased none of the commando men for long, except O'Donovan, and Arthur Binfield who had looked forward to visiting his own home. The others felt they had not stayed long enough in the river valley to feel strongly about the abrupt order to depart. Wherever they went they expected to find public-houses for the evening hours, girls to flirt with, cinemas and other minor pleasures. Many of them hoped they were moving to more urban and livelier surroundings, and when, after some hours on the road, they began to smell the sea in the night air, it recalled memories of childhood holidays. Quickly, however, their anticipations stiffened and became more soldierly. They travelled and arrived in darkness and, as soon as they left the trucks, stiff-limbed and sore-eyed, the roll was called and the whole Commando marched by sub-sections along a quayside. At the head of a stone staircase, wet and slippery, difficult to negotiate in the darkness, naval petty officers guided them down and into launches. Within half an hour every man was aboard the commando ship which at once weighed anchor and steamed out of the little port as dawn was breaking.

The enthusiasts expected to be put ashore on hostile territory within a few hours: the older men believed they were bound for Norway again. But it was the English coast they kept in sight all that day, and at nightfall the ship anchored between two headlands. It was explained to them that they were to undergo special training for some days, perhaps weeks, with the ship as headquarters.

Harry Lomax, whose brash Cockney curiosity could never be intimidated by official occasions, was first on his feet. He felt

that he was speaking for all the young khaki-clad men assembled in the great barrack-room which had been made by removing partitions in the ship's hull.

"Sir, are we going on another raid? That's all we want to know."

"And it's more than I can tell you," said the C.O. "You'll find you've some special tactics to learn and practise. Do that job well, and hope for the best."

It was, they decided, as near to a broad hint as they could hope for. They were satisfied.

Chester Park whispered to Sergeant Cluny, and the sergeant stood up, not like Harry Lomax, half-stooping with the stubborn air of a questioner at a political meeting, but stiffly to attention, hollow backed, arms straight at his sides, head erect. The little sergeant nevertheless was determined to make his point.

"Sir, if there is to be another raid, I would like to put in a word for my sub-section."

The colonel looked surprised, a little puzzled.

"Well, what is it, Sergeant?"

"At Torgsdal, sir, we were left up on the hills, out of the fight."

"Your men did very valuable work, Sergeant Cluny."

"But we never got at close quarters with the enemy, sir. This time we'd like a real chance, and let some other bodies take a turn at giving covering fire."

A murmur of approval from the men near him supported the sergeant's request. The colonel, also, now that he understood, obviously approved.

"I'll do my best for you, Sergeant Cluny. If we do go on a show, that is. But I warn you, you may not like a close assault when you get into it."

"Like it less, Jerry will," muttered Evan Morgan, rearing his head high on his long throat so that he looked like a vainglorious cockerel.

For the next few days they were not permitted to write letters, and when the ban was lifted they found that all their outward correspondence was to be censored before it was sent ashore. The only address they were allowed to give was the number of the Commando: nor could they hint that they were aboard ship

or undergoing special training. Emmet O'Donovan wrote to Carol Blanchard; aware that every word would be read and scrutinised by an officer, perhaps by her brother, he hardly knew what to say to indicate his feelings. After several false starts he wrote, omitting all preliminaries:

"I have never stopped thinking about you, and I don't suppose I ever shall now. That's not literally true: when I am on duty of course I can't. Nor, I suppose, when I am asleep. But always, under all the things that occupy my mind, there is the thought of you. I am very glad and grateful, for it has made my life quite different. Thank you for coming down to say good-bye. That was just like you. I've been proud ever since, but inside myself, because all that is something no one else but you must ever know about.

"If this seems a strange letter—it's the first I've sent you—it's because it has to be censored, and you must understand more than I can write. More about private things, I mean. I think you may be interested to know I was reprimanded the other day for a slight offence. It will be entered on my record sheet until I do something specially good to get it wiped off. Perhaps it won't be long before I get a chance."

This sentence was obliterated by the blue pencil of the censor, a field security officer, who knowing nothing of the commando men, thought the whole letter odd. Unable to find anything else to which he could legitimately take exception, he let it go, resolving to make inquiries about the writer: but pressure of work caused him to forget.

"I can't tell you where I am, or what I am doing, except that I am fit and well and happy. The next time I write I hope to be able to say I am coming to London on leave. Or perhaps you will get a telephone call or a wire one day. You know what I felt when we last met. I still feel the same. I hate writing like this. But there is no other way. It will be much better when we can talk."

He signed his name above an apparently hasty but actually deliberately scrawled "Yours," in which the final "s" was so

vaguely indicated that the censor might assume its existence while Carol might well see no "s" there at all and so, at the very end, receive an intimation of his love for her more direct than any he dared give in the letter itself. He did not suspect that all the commando men's letters were to be held back from the mails until they had begun their journey across the English Channel.

Before that happened they had been put through some vigorous and in certain aspects unusual training. Running exercises, games, physical drill and weapon practice—all carried out on the ship—were nothing out of the way. But twice they were put ashore in conditions of secrecy so strict that they saw no civilians at all except at a distance of some miles. One night the ship moved them a long way round the coast, and the next evening they were landed at the foot of a chalk cliff, very steep and about two hundred feet high. There they were set to practise, in the mild summer evening, with the sun setting away on their left, the climbing crafts they had learned on the Cumberland fells amid snow and ice. The best climbers were selected for special instruction. After dark they were made to climb down again by ropes; then to ascend once more, and descend, again with ropes. Three men had falls, and one broke a leg. He was removed not to a hospital but to the sick bay on the ship.

Cliff-climbing was understandable: it indicated a raid on the French coast, and they cheered the prospect. But the other night they spent ashore was puzzling. This time they were landed in darkness, on sand and shingle, and passed by a succession of sentries through the beach defences. Then the transport-drivers were called out to take charge of trucks—not their own—and the whole Commando moved inland in convoy, following a group of staff cars and shepherded by officers on motor-cycles. The trucks moved without the guidance of maps: the drivers were ignorant not only of their route and destination but of their starting-point. After an hour and a half on the road the convoy turned in between open iron gates—more sentries and staff cars were waiting there—and halted on a long drive. They waited till the moon, two days past the full, rose. Then they were ordered into a practice attack (without even blank ammunition, or the firecrackers called thunder-flashes, to simulate realism).

They went across country, the sections moving on either flank of a long chestnut-lined avenue. The first objective was another avenue which intersected half a mile ahead. They were allowed to halt there, to re-form, for only five minutes, and then the attack moved forward again to seize a large house at the far end of the main avenue. This time they found barbed wire, pit traps, weapon slit-trenches, and strong-points in their path. But there were no troops to represent the enemy; only staff officers who loomed up occasionally out of the half-light to ask questions of men sweating and short of breath.

The house, when they arrived at it, proved to be empty and locked up. They swarmed the drain-pipes, climbed fire-escapes, entered by windows and searched the big building from the tiny attics and store-rooms under the roof to the great, empty, shuttered rooms on the ground floor and the cellars and larders and kitchens, all stone-floored, in the basement. There was no furniture, and the light-switches produced no light. Word was passed that the exercise had come to an end. They assembled in the wood-panelled hall under half a dozen crystal candelabras, and when one of these was suddenly illuminated, the roll was called. The exercise was over; they were ordered outside, without any explanation being given of their recent activities and found that the trucks had moved up to the back of the house. Long before dawn they were on the ship again.

"Well, it beats me!" Frank Fletcher declared.

"They're having us on," said Bobby Clough.

Corporal Gosdaile, however, thought he could see the point. "We're going to capture a chateau in France. A general's headquarters. Maybe we're after Goering? Or, who knows, Hitler himself?"

"One thing. It won't be empty, like that place. Give me the creeps, it did. I'll bet it's haunted. And cold. Summer coming on, yet that blasted house was stone cold in every room."

"That's because it's been empty a long time."

"I wish we could have seen it in daylight," said Chester Park. "In my opinion that was one of the historic mansions of England."

"If it was, give me a nice semi-detached."

The next day they were assembled in the large room in the

centre of the ship. A rough platform was improvised at one end. A blackboard, illuminated by spotlights, had been erected against the steel wall of the hull there. On the platform also stood a long table, or rather a long wooden trough supported by trestles: at a glance the men knew what it was and what it signified: a relief map, in clay, representing some stretch of enemy-held territory. Later on they would study it in detail. Their last doubts were removed. The Commando was going raiding again.

The intelligence officer appeared first, with a sergeant draughtsman. Between them they squared off the blackboard, plotted various points on it, and then drew a map in white chalk: it was a map, the watching men decided, without contours, and at first they found it difficult to make sense of the rapidly-increasing white lines they glimpsed over khaki shoulders and forearms. Coloured chalks were added later, and when the intelligence officer and the sergeant stood back, the map began to look significant. Before the colonel and the other officers arrived the commando men, eager and hopeful, were able to see at the bottom of the blackboard-map a stretch of sea-coast with a curved inlet on the left which, however, did not seem to be either an estuary or the opening of a valley. Farther inland, and more or less parallel to the general line of the coast, were two roads, intersected by a third which ran diagonally inland from right to left, roughly from south-west to north-east. Beyond the second cross-roads was a wood surrounding a building. Apart from a small wood marked "copse," isolated in the north-west corner, some trees indicated along the lines of the diagonal road, and another narrow wood marked "spinney," along one side of the first road inland, the countryside shewn on the map was bare and open.

"Looks like a night raid to me," said Sergeant Cluny.

A succession of loops in blue chalk drawn right across behind the coastline they took to mean barbed wire entanglements: there were more of them at each cross-roads and in front of the wood in the top or north-eastern corner. And behind the barbed wire, at intervals, the intelligence officer had drawn small crosses in green chalk.

The colonel explained at once that his address was to be a

mere preliminary to the detailed study of the clay table-map which would follow.

"We are going to make a raid," he said, "on a part of the French coast which for convenience I will call after the nearest village, Le Bandelot. The object will be first to penetrate the coast defences, if possible without being detected, but in any case to penetrate the defences in some force and swiftly. That is the opening stage of the raid. While it lasts, no officer or man will deliberately seek contact with the enemy. If any contact is made with enemy sentries or fire posts every endeavour will be made to dispose of them silently with bayonets, knives or coshes. The order, then, for the first part of the operation is avoid noise, detection, and the use of firearms or grenades. That order will automatically cease to be effective if shots are heard, whether they come from our side or from the enemy's, or if by the use of flares or rockets the enemy shows that he is raising the alarm. Should that happen the raid will at once become a fight and the raiding parties will press on with all speed, destroying any enemy troops they encounter but seeking above all to reach this wood—here, north of the second cross-roads—and the building you see in the middle of the wood.

"Now we come to the second stage of the raid, and the main object. The building in the wood houses the personnel and some of the equipment of an important radio location station. You will be shown aerial and ground photographs which will enable you to recognise it, apart from its topographical position. It is not an ordinary building: most of it is underground. That is why we are doing this job instead of the R.A.F. You will also be shown photographs of certain types of structures outside the building. Those structures are vital to the enemy's radio location service. Where they are situated is not known exactly. It will be part of your task to find them and to destroy them also. Like the installations inside the building, they need a lot of money and time and labour to make. They cannot easily or quickly be replaced. Detachments of Royal Engineers will accompany the raiding parties with explosives. It will be their job in the first instance to make the demolitions. But let there be no doubt in any one's mind: whatever happens to the engineers, the whole

radio location plant, inside the building and out, must be blown up. If there is any unforeseen delay, or if anything goes wrong, I look to the men of this Commando to see that the destruction is carried out thoroughly. That is what we are going across the Channel for: fighting the enemy this time is only incidental."

"A nice big bang is a very satisfactory thing," Evan Morgan whispered. "I have used dynamite in quarries, as well as in the pits."

The colonel then wrote in some names on the blackboard map, using white chalk. "Some of you can learn the correct French names later on," he said, "but for convenience we'll stick to English now."

The inlet became the Bay: the first road parallel with the coast was lettered Coast Road: and the next, behind which lay the radio location station hidden in a wood, became Inner Road: and the diagonal road, intersecting both of them, was called the Avenue. The cross-roads were called Oxford and Cambridge Circus.

"You will get detailed orders and small folding maps later on: all to be returned, as usual, before the raid starts. But now," the colonel said, "I'm going to give you an outline of the operation as a whole. The coast here consists of a continuous chalk cliff. Average height from the beach or high tide level is about a hundred and twenty feet. Not much more than half as high as the cliffs you were climbing the other day. It'll be child's play to you. We'll use the same technique. Selected men, good climbers will go first without ropes. They'll belay at the cliff top and haul the ropes up. The others will follow, using the ropes.

"Two landings will be made, from assault craft. Escorted and covered by the Navy. The Royal Air Force, by the way, will not take part in this operation: we don't wish to draw attention to ourselves, at least till the radio location outfit is blown sky high. So there will be no fighter or bomber co-operation unless something goes wrong. Aircraft will be standing by with engines tuned up at advanced airfields on our side of the channel in case we summon help by radio. But this place is stiff with ack-ack. They've got gun and searchlight sites all around it: most of them not so near that we're likely to run into them.

The air force will come if we need them: they can be over there in a few minutes. But we can't expect them to run too many risks to valuable air crews and machines just to get a Commando out of a hole. The point is: we've been given this task because the place is so well defended against air attack. We represent the whole British Army. We must not fall down on the job.

"One landing will be made at the Bay, rather to the east of the dead centre. The other will be three-quarters of a mile away to the west. There are gullies and paths up the cliffs, but we expect them to be choked with wire, and mined, and probably covered by machine-gun fire as well. Absolute silence is essential for this first part of the raid. And every key point as it is reached must be effectively guarded. All round defence. That means detachments to hold the beach and the cliff tops. It means stalking enemy sentries and patrols and putting them out of action quietly.

"Each landing-party will then pass on inland. As fast as possible. The ground is pretty level and open: a slight rise to the north-east. Short grass, used for sheep-grazing in peacetime. Very little cover. The copse and the spinney may well be held by the enemy. We know some of his fire positions. Here they are—these green crosses. We can't be sure we know them all. Above all, we can't be sure where his patrols and mobile reserve troops will be at the time of the raid. That's one reason why we've waited for the moon to pass the full. We don't want either pitch darkness or too good visibility. Some of you will be thinking it might have been wiser to land a few miles away where perhaps there are no cliffs. Well, we'd thought of that. On both flanks there are open beaches. But the Nazis know it better than we do. They must guard those beaches even more strongly. That's why we've chosen the cliffs. It's the direct and more difficult route. If we can establish ourselves first at the foot, then at the top of the cliffs, we have a really good chance of achieving our object before the enemy knows what is happening. But we must be quiet, we must make no mistakes, and we must move swiftly.

"From the Bay to the radio station is just under two miles.

From the other landing-point it is about three hundred yards farther. Each landing-party must get through the belt of barbed wire behind the cliff top. It varies in depth between ten and twenty feet. Our information is that it is not mined, but don't rely on that too much. Put your feet down softly. Behind the barbed wire there are four fire positions. Each consists of two weapon-pits with fire bays facing the wire, the cliff top and the sea. Expect machine-guns there, and tommy-guns when you get to close quarters. Sub-sections will be detailed to deal with these—by stalking them. No firing and no grenades.

"Number 1 landing-party at the Bay will leave detachments to hold the two first weapon-pits on its route north. Then it will push into the eastern end of the spinney which borders the Coast Road, establish a post to command the road-approach from the east, search the spinney and seize the first cross-roads. I've called it Oxford Circus. Number 2 landing-army will seize and hold its own weapon-pits in the same way, and then the main body will move on first north-west, crossing the Avenue, then north. It will seize the stretch of the Coast Road from Oxford Circus to a point two hundred yards west. We shall then hold four hundred yards of the Coast Road and can guard it against reinforcements coming from any direction. The remaining stretch of the Avenue is sure to be swept by machine-guns and perhaps anti-tank or field-guns from the junction with Inner Road at Cambridge Circus. It can be regarded as a death-trap for any one attempting to attack along it.

"You understand that as the attack progresses it grows weaker in numerical strength owing to parties detached to hold key points as they come into our possession. That is actually an advantage to us. It gives the final assault security in the rear. And we do not need too many men for the last stages. From the Coast Road, then, the attack moves north-east on both flanks of the remaining stretch of the Avenue. The right flank will seize the part of Inner Road in front of it and also the cross-roads we'll call Cambridge Circus. They will detach a squad to occupy the outlying copse. The left flank, the party landed at the Bay, will capture its own section of Inner Road and also push through the wood to the radio station itself. This final assault-party will be commanded by Captain Blanchard."

"And that means," said Sergeant Cluny, almost but not quite to himself, "my sub-section will be there. This is very promising."

The colonel asked for questions, and dozens were put to him. Most of them he referred to detailed orders, which differed for each sub-section, and to the study of the clay table-map. Trooper O'Donovan asked if the practice attack they had carried out ashore the previous evening was a rehearsal for this raid.

"Thank you for reminding me of that," the commanding-officer said. "I had meant to explain. Yes, it was a kind of rough rehearsal. We can't reproduce exactly the kind of ground we shall have to fight over, so we looked round for a large house, preferably empty, with woods and an avenue approach. Last night's exercise was to give us a general idea of the conditions we shall encounter. We could not practise the raid in detail, because the ground will differ in many respects. Remember, the main objective of this raid is not an ordinary building, but a concrete structure for the most part underground. But at least the opening stages of the practice attack last night, working on both flanks of the avenue, were not unlike what we can expect across the Channel at Le Bandelot."

On only one other point did the colonel elaborate: the withdrawal. The action was to be completed in three hours at the most. When the last demolition had been made, a signal rocket would be fired from the wood: two green lights and a red. On seeing that, the detachment at the copse would fall back on the Coast Road. The other detachments would wait for the final assault-parties to return and withdraw with them. Each was to be given a maximum time of waiting after the signal rocket: if the others had not rejoined by then, the detachments were to return to the cliff tops independently.

CHAPTER 18

The Avenue

THE next evening brought anti-climax and frustration. At five o'clock the Commando assembled and waited for the ship's engines to start. But before six they were told that the raid had been postponed owing to unsuitable weather. Their nerves relaxed angrily, like coiled springs set free. After nightfall they went on deck by sections, wearing rubber-soled shoes, to run quietly round and round for an hour. The ship was still anchored offshore and as she must pass for a merchantman no one in khaki was allowed to show himself in daylight. Exercise had to be taken at night. The men grumbled among themselves. They rose late the next morning to pass the day under the electric lights between decks: they complained of lack of fresh air. They wanted to be active, no longer shipbound, and when they were assembled again in the late afternoon they cynically expected another postponement. This time, however, the raid was "on." As soon as the ship began to quiver to the rhythmic thudding of the engines, they started to play rough games among themselves and to sing ribald songs. This was permitted while the ship was still moving along the British coast. They ate and they slept. After dusk the ship turned out into the Channel: they knew this because they were told so, and told at the same time to make less noise. Following, unawares, an old tradition of the British Army, as action drew near, they became sentimental: they sang now, very softly and slowly, songs about mothers, about love, about the parting of sweethearts, exile, bereavement, and little children.

The ship was making a swift and direct passage towards the coast of France, and time passed more quickly than they had

expected. Sergeant Cluny, looking at his watch, waited for Evan Morgan to conclude his rendering (by request) in Welsh (against the wishes of the others) of "All Through the Night."

"It willna be long now," said the sergeant, "before we go ashore. I'll just run over the orders again."

He repeated the password and countersign, and then began to question them in turn.

"Lomax, you first. What are we making this raid for?"

"Fun."

"Don't get fresh with me, my lad. It's still not too late to have you put on a charge and then you'll be left behind on the ship."

"I didn't mean any harm, Sarge."

"It's an offence against good orders and military discipline to be facetious wi' a superior officer."

"If you leave me behind, I'll commit suicide. Swelp me, I will, Sarge, I'll go overboard. Bung in the drink I'll go."

"That's another offence. Threats."

"I'd better shut up," Lomax decided desperately.

"Ay, but you'll answer my question first, and you'll answer wi' proper respect and seriousness. What's the purpose o' this raid?"

"To destroy the radio location station at Le Blooming Band-box or whatever it's called."

"You're very poorly educated, like most of the English. But I'm kindhearted. I'll let it pass this time. The correct name is Le Bandelot. Now, Binfield, where does our sub-section land?"

"At the Bay. We're second up the ropes."

"Clough! Which landing-party do we belong to?"

"The left flank. Number One."

"Who's in command?"

"Captain Blanchard."

"And where's the other landing-party?"

"On our right, Sergeant."

"How far away? You, Morgan, you answer that one."

"Three-quarters of a mile away. We shall not see them, I doubt."

"Not till we make contact. Where do we do that?"

"The cross-roads."

"Which one?"

"Oxford Circus."

Harry Lomax broke in: "Wish I was there now. The real Oxford Circus, I mean."

"The wind up have you got?" Evan Morgan inquired sarcastically.

"No, I haven't, you Welsh bastard. What do you mean? Can't a bloke think about a night up west, without——"

"Quiet, both of you. If you only fight half as hard as you talk, you'll do."

"I haven't seen the new Palladium show yet," Harry Lomax explained. "That's all I was thinking of. I wouldn't like to get knocked out without seeing the new Palladium show. Max Miller. I know a chap was at school with him. Proper caution he was too, by all accounts, even when he was only a nipper."

"Do you more good, it would, to go and listen to a high-class chapel choir."

"It's many years, Evan Morgan, since you were in chapel," said Frank Fletcher.

"What is this?" Sergeant Cluny was scandalised. "Are we discussing religion and morals or a raid? Amateur soldiers, that's what you are! You don't apply your minds. Now where was I? I know. Fighting. That's what we're going ashore for, isn't it?"

"Indeed, yes," Evan Morgan agreed enthusiastically.

"Well, you're wrong. Didn't you hear what the O.C. said? Park, you tell us what the orders are about fighting."

"Avoid the enemy for the first stage of the attack," said the American. "Other sub-sections have the job of snaffling his sentries and patrols on the cliff top. But if there are shots or flares or signal rockets, off we go, hell for leather."

"Well that'll do. O'Donovan, what are our objectives, in order?"

"Weapon-pits beyond the wire. Then the spinney and the cross-roads at Oxford Circus. Then Inner Road, and straight on to the radio location station itself. We deal with installations outside the building."

"Correct. And if the sappers don't blow 'em up, we do. Oh, just one thing. The Avenue. Keep off it. It's sure to be covered by machine-guns. Any man going near it, I'll blow his brains out myself. That is, if you've got anything behind your foreheads except bone." Remembering the obligations of discipline, Sergeant Cluny added: "That doesna apply to you, Corporal," and was shocked when Gosdaile acknowledged his exemption with a slight, mocking, civilian bow.

Number 2 landing-party was the first to be ordered on deck: as they had farther to go, they were to be put ashore first. By the time Sergeant Cluny's sub-section climbed the companion-way, the ship was moving again. They needed a few minutes to accustom their eyes to the darkness.

"The bloody moon, where the hell is it?" Evan Morgan whispered.

"Not up yet. We've got to be on top of the cliffs before the moon shows."

"Quiet there!"

As the ship slowed to a standstill and they climbed down to the assault boats, they were able to make out the raked masts and squat funnels of two destroyers near at hand. The brisk saltiness of the air was grateful to them. Remembering the cold of Torgsdal, the frozen, sliddery snow, the thick swaddling of extra clothing which then hampered their every movement, they responded joyfully to the mild benigance of this still summer night. They felt strong, supple, confident, light of mind and body, with only thin battledress and skeleton equipment to carry, canvas shoes instead of boots on their feet, khaki wool caps, piratically shaped, on their heads, instead of the familiar weight of steel helmets. O'Donovan, Evan Morgan and Harry Lomax had been given a new type of sub-machine gun, called the Sten: at first they had thought it too cheap and rough a production, but tested on the range it had proved as effective as the Thompson gun, and the bullets carried farther. The Stens were beautifully light in the hand, and could be twirled like revolvers with a couple of fingers. Their thoughts leaped forward to breach the coming hours: they anticipated the capture of their main objective and its destruction. They longed to be

relying on the speed and vigour of their own bodies, to be moving, light-foot, unseen, towards the ultimate task. The assault boat churning a way towards the shore seemed all too slow. They envied the sailors in the fast launches which moved this way and that—but never far away—round the little convoy of steel barges lying low and dark on the water.

The sea became smother. They could hear the soft somnolent beat and suck back of the surf. Then they saw the cliffs, solidly pale in an unbroken curve, rising vertically out of the darkness ahead, growing apparently taller as the barges ran aground. Each man as he crossed the lowered ramp felt an impulse of exultant satisfaction: it was good to be ashore again, to be in full control of one's own movements; it was good to set foot on land held by the Nazis; and good to be starting a venture which was to surprise and damage the enemy, to remind him of mortality, of justice, of the power of common men to strike back at their oppressors.

At the foot of the cliff they were delayed two minutes while the last men of the first sub-section climbed up with handgrips on the ropes and eager thrusts of feet and thighs. Then Sergeant Cluny led the way, leaving Corporal Gosdaile to see the others up and to follow himself. O'Donovan went fourth, his Sten gun slung over his shoulders. The cliff was stratified laterally: even in the dark it was possible to trace the long thin lines between one layer of white chalk, stained sometimes gray, sometimes brown, and the next. Grasses and little flowering plants were tufted into the crevices. The act of climbing invigorated him, waking muscular delights, refining his senses: he exulted in the hot rasp of the rope on his hands, the sharp angles of the cliff surface felt through the rubber soles of his shoes as he thrust and hauled upwards. His mind felt free, free to appreciate all his senses, the cool sea smell in his nostrils and a thymy fragrance, herbal and delicate, as he came to the top where chalk gave place to crumbling brown clay. Then his attention concentrated on the selective and purposeful actions required of him as a soldier: he crawled on to the springy turf, stared forward right and left into the darkness, penetrable for less than a hundred yards, and slowly recognised the figures of other

men near at hand: Sergeant Cluny, Chester Park, Frank Fletcher. In a whisper the sergeant told them to form up to the left. O'Donovan crawled silently off with the others: Bobby Clough and Arthur Binfield joined them. He removed a loaded magazine from his left cartridge pouch, inserted it in the side of the Sten gun, tapped it home, and pulled the cocking handle to the safety position.

They spoke little and in careful half-breath whispers as they lay side by side. Another sub-section, which was to hold the cliff-top post, was spread out in a semi-circle in front: they were glad it was their task to go through to the end of the attack and not wait back here.

Inland there was nothing to be seen, not even the distant dimmed headlamps of a car or a searchlight. The initial surprise had been successful. Confidence and expectation warmed their racing pulses. But almost at once they heard sounds of a scuffle on their left, a choked cry, the noise of something falling heavily to the ground. A tall figure, crouching as it ran, went past them, moving fast towards the sound: the revolver in the hand told them it was an officer, and a brief glimpse of a profile with moustache and high-bridged nose identified Captain Blanchard. A moment later he returned and bent down beside them. At the same moment Sergeant Cluny and Corporal Gosdaile came up with the last man of the sub-section.

"We've just got a couple of sentries," the captain whispered. "I don't think any one heard. You ready to move, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then off you go. Here, I'll check your direction."

Full length on the turf, he examined a luminous compass, turned it, let the needle steady, then raised an arm to point. "There's your route. That should take you through the wire, midway between the two pairs of weapon-pits. You'll look after the right-hand pair. Remember—no noise."

They got to their knees, then to their feet, and ran off, bent double, on softfalling feet. A silver glitter was diffused in the sky now, more pervasive than the starshine: very soon the moon would be rising clear. But the raid had begun well and they were loose in German-occupied France, a band of expert marau-

ders with darkened faces and their plan of attack sharp and urgent in their minds. They moved in single file and saw the belt of barbed wire in good time. It was higher, thicker and deeper than the obstacle at Torgsdal. They made a path through the bottom layer, one man working with the cutters while another held the strands on either side so that the snapped ends could not twangle as they broke loose. Where the wire was piled high, in circular coils, they hauled it down to head height and then forced it lower with the weight of their bodies. Later, the sub-section at the cliff top would send men forward to clear a wider passage and guard it against their return. The important thing now was to get through the wire as quickly and silently as possible: silence was as essential as speed, for if they were fired on while the wire still held them up, they would have little chance of escaping heavy casualties.

At last they were through and, scattered into diamond patrol formation now, they began to crawl with outspread arms and legs towards where the maps had told them to expect a line of weapon-pits. If the pits were manned, it was their duty to take them by surprise and dispose of the Germans without using any noisy weapons. They crawled straight ahead for thirty or forty yards and then turned right to approach the pits from the rear as well as from the flank. They were convinced of success now, although they did not forget their skill or their caution. But they had scarcely progressed on this last part of the stalk when, far away on the right, the silence was broken by the sound of a single shot. Then louder explosions, which they recognised as hand grenades, and distant machine-gun fire.

"Fight we can, now," exclaimed Evan Morgan, on his feet at once.

"Come on," the sergeant called. "And keep in line."

As they ran hurling themselves forward into the darkness which revealed nothing, Emmet O'Donovan wondered of there were indeed any weapon-pits in front of them, or, should the pits be there, whether any one guarded them. The next second the problem was solved: a machine-gun began to fire from thirty yards away: they located it by the stuttering sound and the tiny flashes from the muzzle. But the Germans were firing in the

wrong direction, firing at the cliff tops and out to sea, with their backs to the attackers now running towards them on rubber-padded feet. The commando men could at last see the trench ahead, narrow, unparapeted, with four steel helmets showing. Three of the Germans were killed by the Sten guns before they could know what was happening. The fourth ducked and was lost to sight, till—he must have leaped out of the pit—he blundered between O'Donovan and another commando man. The next moment O'Donovan caught a glimpse of a grey tunic and a leather belt illuminated briefly by the bright golden flash from an automatic pistol. With the scream from one of his comrades—he could not tell who had been hit—echoing in his ears, rasping his nerves, O'Donovan sprang after the German, who was running once more. He dropped on one knee as the man turned: the German's pistol bullets whipped sibilantly over his head while he pressed the Sten gun trigger and round after round rattled off, jerking the murderous little weapon against his shoulder. He walked forward, counting his paces: seventeen. The German was dead, his chest riddled and bloody. It was just possible to see he had a pallid, rather fat face. He lay on his back, helmet knocked askew, and his mouth gaped open.

Chester Park came up.

"Did you get him, kid?"

"Yes. Look."

"No one'd think it, but you were made for this."

"I hate it," said O'Donovan.

"Just the same, you were quicker'n any of us."

But O'Donovan knew he had wasted ammunition, keeping his finger pressed too long on the trigger. The shattered body of the dead German was an indictment of his own ineptitude. He had used nearly half a magazine to put one man out of action.

He asked: "Who did this chap hit?"

"The corporal. Killed him, too. Through the eye."

No more boxing, no more sports cars, no more girl friends for Bill Gosdaile.

"The corp was unlucky," said the American. "That's all. Just happened to be in the wrong place, that's all." He looked at the dead German.

"Is this guy an officer?" he asked.

"I don't think so. N.C.O. probably."

"He had guts, anyhow. We'd better take his badges and identity papers."

"I'd rather you did that," said O'Donovan.

"O.K."

O'Donovan went back and reported to the sergeant, who said: "Good boy." The other weapon-pit held no one: it was an alternative position. If the Germans had moved to it, immediately after opening fire with their machine-gun, they would have had a much better chance.

Bobby Clough was saying it was a pity for the three Germans who were caught in the trench to die like that, shot in the back. Unless they happened to be out and out Nazis.

"We've wasted too much time already," Sergeant Cluny declared. "However, the balloon's gone up now, so we can move fast. O'Donovan, I'm putting you in Gosdaile's place. You act as corporal from now on. While the raid lasts. Let's get cracking."

Not far away to their left a fight was still going on: the other weapon-pits had not been so easily or swiftly surprised, and were resisting with machine-gun fire, but the noisy and sudden crimson flaming of hand grenades showed that the commando men there were getting nearer. Further away to the west, where the alarm had been raised, heavier guns were firing. They might be German batteries, or the destroyers, or both: there was no knowing. And as the sub-section plunged forward into the darkness, once more in the formation of a diamond, each man ready to face outwards, they saw all round them batteries of search-lights frenziedly investigating the sky: against the restless pillars of light they occasionally glimpsed a line of tree-tops: the spinney on the Coast Road!

"That makes it easier," said Harry Lomax.

"Won't be so easy when we get there," Sergeant Cluny told him. "We're expected now. Get ready to go flat when I give the word."

"Be there first, we shall," Morgan exclaimed, his voice higher

and shriller than ever with excitement. "All the rest of the outfit held up. Right and proper it is, we should lead the attack."

"What about that moon?" Chester Park demanded. "Where's it gotten to?" The night was as dark as ever.

"Hold your whisht," the sergeant commanded.

They ran on softly, at a steady trot, unable to see what was immediately concealed by the darkness in front of them, unaware whether next moment they would crash into more barbed wire or come under fire from Germans concealed behind concrete or sandbags. At last they sighted the spinney. It was queer, Emmet O'Donovan thought, how he still held in his memory the picture of all this country, shaped in miniature out of modelling clay, something small, defined, near, something he had looked down upon, bending over a table in the middle of the commando ship: and now, ever since he climbed over the edge of the cliff, he was rediscovering it, enlarged, spread in front of him laterally, recognisable in sudden snatches of hasty uncertain vision beneath the clouded summer night.

They entered the spinney at the extreme left edge. They left the Coast Road alone till they had searched the trees and undergrowth from end to end, as far as the cross-roads they called Oxford Circus. They found no one, German or British. Even the cottage at the edge of the spinney, overlooking the cross-roads, though furnished, was empty. They disposed themselves to guard every approach.

"I said we should be here first," Evan Morgan exulted.

"Do we push on?" O'Donovan asked the sergeant. By now he had grown accustomed to the idea that at nineteen he was an acting corporal, preferred above older, more experienced men.

"We'll give the others twenty minutes to get here. If they're not here by then, we'll finish the job ourselves. Not that we can do much without the engineers. This is where they're to join us, with the explosives."

The delay was exasperating.

Making a rapid tour of the hurriedly established posts, O'Donovan found Bobby Clough arguing in fierce whispers with Binfield.

"I never saw the like of it before," he was saying. "It can't be English."

"That's only because you live in a hole like Manchester. I've seen 'em by the hundred at home, often and often."

"It don't look like a worm exactly."

"It's an insect. More like a grasshopper."

"It's brighter'n a firework too. Does it bite? Or burn?"

Arthur Binfield laughed. "You're a proper townie, you are."

Bending over them, O'Donovan saw they were examining a glow-worm, which had perched, phosphorescent, pallidly green like a jewel, on a blade of grass.

He told them not to talk, and hurried away, envying their composure. Himself, he was tense with suppressed and thwarted excitement.

In pairs they lay concealed beside each of the four roads, two branches of the Avenue and two of the Coast Road. They could fire on any enemy approaching, but they lacked the weapons to stop transport. There were other unforeseen elements in the situation. The Coast Road, so far as they could observe it, was bounded on both sides by a stone wall, five feet high, which had not been indicated in maps or orders.

"Inadequate information," said Frank Fletcher.

"You want everything served on a plate for you," said Sergeant Cluny. "What's the difference? We may be glad o' they walls if Jerry gets going with an m.g."

The sergeant then went off to make a reconnaissance of the northern stretch of the Avenue, leading towards Inner Road and the radio location station.

O'Donovan remonstrated. "You told us to keep away from the Avenue. Besides, you ought not to go alone."

"This is different. One man has a chance. A good chance. And I can't take anyone away from these posts. I'll be back in five minutes. Say, ten."

Left alone, with Chester Park at his side, O'Donovan felt exhilarated: he was in sole command of the first main objective, for the time being the leader of the first sub-section to penetrate so far as this. But as minute after minute went slowly and painfully by, doubts intruded into his mind. He began to wonder

what had happened to the sergeant, to the sappers, to the rest of the Commando. Looking down the southward stretch of the Avenue and across the open ground to the right, over which they had come, he could see flashes and hear the noise of firing. It seemed as if the fight was going on in scattered encounters everywhere between the cross-roads where he lay and the coast. The first part of the Commando plan had not come off: they had not been able to get within striking distance of their objective undetected. And the moon was concealed by clouds: the meteorologists had not foreseen that, but whether, as things had turned out, the advantage lay with the enemy, fighting from concealed positions on ground they knew well, or with the raiders seeking ways through, O'Donovan could not be sure. He knew only that time was being lost: that there was no longer any question of surprise: that already the Germans would be standing to their posts at the radio location station and in all probability ordering up mobile reserves.

Then things began to happen. Less than a hundred yards away down the Avenue, between the ditch where he lay with Chester Park and the cliff tops, a machine-gun opened fire. It was firing away from them. Therefore it was German. Almost immediately he heard the noise of a petrol engine behind his right shoulder: then a crackling of rifle shots, and the explosion of a grenade.

"Hold on here," he said to Chester Park.

He cut through the spinney, raised himself by his hands to look over the wall, and saw a motor-cycle with a sidecar crashed against the wall almost under his eyes. Two German soldiers sprawled beside it on the grass. He jumped up to the parapet of the wall, called, "It's me—O'Donovan," and leaped down. Bobby Clough was bending over the Germans, while Arthur Binfield, on the far side of the road, kept guard.

"Got 'em with a Mills," said Bobby. "Landed it right in the side-car. One's dead. The other's pretty far gone." He bent down. "He doesn't look like a Nazi either. I'll bet he's just a conscript, poor devil."

"Come on," said O'Donovan. "We've got a job to do. You stay

here," he told Binfield. "We shan't be long. We're going to start a scrap over there. Jerry m.g. in action."

He took one man from each of the other posts, collected Chester Park on the way, and led them down the Avenue. They crouched as they ran, ready to drop to the ground at any minute, dodging from tree to tree as they advanced. The machine-gun was still firing from the ditch beside the road, so they approached on the other side. O'Donovan was leading and it was he who first saw the silhouetted shapes of men coming nearer, only fifteen yards away—and on the right side of the road. He dropped down behind the trunk of a chestnut-tree. There he could just discern the helmeted heads against the dark sky. Germans! Germans with another machine-gun. There were two teams giving each other covering fire alternately as they withdrew down the Avenue, each firing from the ditch and the hedge across open country. Those on the move walked right into the muzzles of the rifles and Sten guns, and put up their hands at once. The other machine-gun team was wiped out with quick bursts of fire across the road. No one survived there.

A flare burst on the right, illuminating men and trees with a white glaring incandescence. They dropped to the ground, captors and prisoners, among the dead, as a machine-gun opened fire on the Avenue. Behind O'Donovan a man groaned, cursed and then began to scream.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Evan Morgan."

Chester Park crawled to see how badly the Welshman was hit.

O'Donovan raised his voice, shouting into the darkness. "Hold your fire, you bloody fools. We've got all these Jerries, and we're holding the cross-roads besides."

After a few protracted seconds, the machine-gun stopped firing.

Then a voice asked, suspiciously: "What did you say about the cross-roads?"

"I said we're in possession."

"Which cross-roads?"

"Oxford Circus."

"Who is that, anyway?"

"O'Donovan."

A pause. The flare died out.

"O'Donovan, give the password."

He gave it, and then insisted on receiving the counter-sign.

A moment later the tall figure of Captain Blanchard appeared by the roadside.

"All right, O'Donovan, but next time better be more careful with your language till you know who you're speaking to."

Chester Park growled and spat.

"I'm sorry, sir. But we were in a tight spot. One of our men was hit by your Bren. Trooper Morgan."

"He's dead," said Chester Park.

Captain Blanchard turned and, holding a hand-torch towards the ground, flashed a brief morse signal to right and left of the road. Presently commando men came up in twos and threes, sweating, panting figures taking gradual shape out of the darkness. Among them were the engineers at last, carrying their heavy boxes of explosives. They were all directed forward on the Coast Road.

O'Donovan was ordered to collect his party, find Sergeant Cluny, and tell him to re-form the sub-section at the far side of the cross-roads. He went off feeling humiliated and sick. He had just a moment's freedom of mind to remember that David Blanchard was brother to Carol. Carol was far away, in another world, a quieter, more peaceful, more gracious world, where men were not impelled to kill and be killed in darkness, never seeing each other fairly, straining for glimpses of helmets or woollen caps and according to that trivial indication pressing a trigger to set a murderous little machine to work. It was as simple as that: you gripped with both hands, aimed at a shadow, moved a forefinger, and bullets coughed out into the darkness to slay or to maim. And the power you were given quivered hot in your blood, cold in your mind. This was what you had to do in 1941, if you were young and male, because the Fascists had broken loose in a world that refused to believe in evil till evil struck it down. There was no other way out: you could fight evil only with its own weapons. You could defend the world in which Carol existed only by going out into the other world where

Hitler raved and threatened. The boy walked on in silence, shuddering with hatreds: hatred of his enemies still alive; hatred of the dead for being dead and dying hideously; hatred of himself for killing them; hatred of David Blanchard for being unjust and ungrateful.

CHAPTER 19

Cross-Roads at Le Bandolet

THE moment he met Sergeant Cluny, O'Donovan was rid of his unhappiness. He ceased to possess a private personality. He became once again an instrument of war, not mindless but aware only of externals and the common purpose to which he lent his personal will. The sergeant also had news to impart. Reconnoitring the northern stretch of the Avenue, he had discovered a number of motor-trucks parked on each side, under the trees. He had counted twenty. They seemed to be empty and unguarded.

"See what that means, lads? We can dodge round them and under them. They'll be good cover. What's more, I've got permission to take the sub-section that way. We'll make a direct assault on the next cross-roads—Cambridge Circus. O'Donovan, you'll take that side of the road with Park and Fletcher and Clough. I'll be on this side, with the others."

The sappers stayed back: they were not to expose themselves with their valuable loads of explosives which must be preserved till they were needed. The demolition-party would be summoned when the radio location station was captured. By now, every one knew that the assault was going to be difficult and costly. The Commando had lost many casualties between the cliff top and the Coast Road: the German defence further on was likely to be even stiffer. Already there were flares and star-shells lighting up the sky ahead and around them, and sometimes they heard aircraft: but their early advance along the Avenue was undisturbed. Then a searchlight ahead began to sweep from side to side—at ground level. Fields of young corn, the green stalks a foot high, hedges and ditches, the copse on

the right flank, were brightly illuminated in turn. Between the roadside trees and the copse they saw a scattered line of commando men, caught and held in the beam as they advanced. Some went swiftly and naturally to the ground; others staggered, twisted, fell and lay still, or flailed their arms and legs in agony, for from Inner Road machine-guns were now firing continuously.

The searchlight then swung towards the Avenue: the blinding white beam crossed it, lighting up the chestnut-trees theatrically. Another beam, from the far side, swivelled to intersect with the first. But Sergeant Cluny's sub-section had already advanced two hundred yards. The searchlights were not near enough to the far end of the Avenue to catch them: the two beams intersected behind their backs.

"We're in luck."

"So far!"

"Hurry up," said O'Donovan.

With open country to cross, and searchlights sweeping the ground to light them up whenever they attempted to move, the main part of the attack, spread out on either side of the Avenue, had little chance of pressing forward. Whenever a Bren-gun opened fire on a light projector, the beam swung directly towards it, blinding the gunner and his mate, and immediately the German machine-guns concentrated on the new target. If the Bren-gun was not silenced at once, mortar shells began to explode around it. But in the Avenue, where Sergeant Cluny's sub-section was advancing, all was dark. The very fact that the searchlights, intersecting behind them, had revealed nothing might delude the Germans. The only point where the attack could go safely and swiftly forward was in the centre—along the Avenue.

O'Donovan darted across the roadway, stooping as he ran, to consult Sergeant Cluny. He suggested that they should send back to the cross-roads for reinforcements and then force a way through.

"That'll take time," the sergeant objected. "By then, Jerry'll rumble us. We'll do this on our own. Away now, as fast as ye can."

They were among the motor-trucks, which were parked aslant, backed between trees, half off the road. They used the trucks for cover, crouching behind the big doubled-tyred wheels of one, then leaping forward to the next. The Germans were sure to have at least one post at the end of the Avenue, at the Cambridge Circus cross-roads. That meant a fight: it must be quickly finished.

When they reached the last trucks, O'Donovan led his men to the right, through the hedge and into a meadow. He knew that Sergeant Cluny was making a similar diversion to the left. Cluny's men got there first: they heard the hand grenades exploding before they had located the concrete strong point on their own side of the cross-roads. The flash of the explosions showed them where to go, and in a few seconds Chester Park was standing on the concrete top, pulling the pins out of Mills bombs and thrusting them through the loop-holes. O'Donovan led the others to the right, along Inner Road, as fast as he could run. They found the machine-gun posts on the far side of the hedge and took them from the rear. One German swung his gun at them. Frank Fletcher went down, before Bobby Clough killed the gunner with a burst from his Sten. The searchlight crews surrendered and were disarmed: they were surprised and frightened, and it was difficult to make them understand the order to switch off the lights. Chester Park came up to say the other searchlight on the far side of the cross-roads had been extinguished, so it seemed that Sergeant Cluny had put the enemy out of action there.

O'Donovan shouted into the darkness. "Commando! Commando there! Come on quick. We've got the road for you."

"Who's that? O'Donovan again?"

"Yes."

This time there was no parleying. One of the men in the assault-party, as they ran up over the fields, shouted: "It's a bloody good Irish name, anyhow."

"If Evan Morgan wasn't dead," said Bobby Clough, "he'd be telling us what clever lads we are."

Captain Blanchard took O'Donovan's report, given in three sentences. and then hurried them on.

"Didn't even say thank you," Chester Park muttered.

Behind them the stretcher-bearers were attending to casualties, and the engineers had come up as far as the cross-roads, eager to do what they had come to do. But at once the commando men were caught up in the final close assault across Inner Road and into the wood. Among the trees the fighting was a confusion of fury: they were never able properly to locate the German garrison there. They fired at glimpses of helmets, at flashes, at moving bodies. From inside the building they heard explosions and shouts. But the men of Sergeant Cluny's subsection, no longer united, split up by the onrush of the other commando men for whom they had breached the defence line, fighting individually as best they could, remembered it was no part of their duty to attack the building. They roamed the surrounding wood searching in the half-light for surviving, unsundered enemies who still occasionally fired from the ground or from the cover of bushes and tree trunks, and sometimes protected their retreat with stick grenades.

Half a dozen engineers came running between the trees, heavily laden, and were guided to the building; not more than five feet of concrete showed above ground, and that was concealed by camouflage netting hung overhead. O'Donovan, Harry Lomax, Bobby Clough and Chester Park discovered each other again and began a more systematic search of the wood. This was still uncompleted when from inside the radio location station there came a quick succession of heavy eruptive noises.

"That's that!"

All round them now were commando men, with white teeth grinning out of sweat-streaked dark faces.

"We've done it after all."

Someone lighted a cigarette, and had it, with the flaming match, struck from his hand.

An engineer sergeant asked for a man who knew where the radio installations in the wood were to be found. O'Donovan led him there and watched him, with two sappers, tamp in the dynamite.

"You chaps had better clear out now."

Others took up the call.

"Clear the wood! Demolition coming! Back to the road."

They waited on the roadsides, guarded by hurriedly-posted look-outs, till the engineers came running out of the wood: the trees behind them were lighted by an outfanning burst of flame, which tinged the undersides of great clouds of smoke. They could see fragments of metal and timber sent spinning and twisting upward.

"Where's Frank Fletcher?" O'Donovan asked.

"He got it in the belly, along the road there, when that machine-gun swung round on us. The stretcher-bearers picked him up. But he got it bad."

"And what about the sergeant?"

O'Donovan had to push his way through the crowd, endeavouring to sort themselves into sub-sections again, before he found Cluny. The little sergeant was leaning on Arthur Binfield's shoulder. The trouser of his right leg had been torn open, and a bandage, soaked scarlet with blood, was bound round his thigh. His face was bleeding too, and pitted with tiny embedded fragments from a hand grenade.

For the first time since he left the ship O'Donovan saw the colonel, who had been with the right flank party. He was wounded in the head and the shoulder, but had insisted on being brought up on a stretcher. Lying by the roadside, he was now giving orders to the officers.

"Back to the cliffs at once. No delays. Captain Blanchard, set that rocket off. The success signal."

"Yes, sir."

"You all know your routes. Pick up the other detachments as you go."

"What about you, sir?"

"I'll be all right. I'm using up four stretcher-bearers, worse luck."

O'Donovan turned to Sergeant Cluny. "You ought to be on a stretcher too."

"None left. Anyhow, I can walk all right, wi' a bit of help. Now you lads be off. I'll get there, never worry. You're in command, O'Donovan."

"We're going along with you, Sergeant."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Bad enough for me to keep Binfield back. Jerry'll be bringing up reinforcements. Off with you now. That's an order."

O'Donovan refused to obey, and the others backed him. He chose also to ignore the prescribed return route for the subsection. They would go back, he decided, along the Avenue, unless the enemy drove them off it: it was a quicker, more direct route. From the Oxford Circus cross-roads they could cut across country to the cliff-tops. Sergeant Cluny fretted over this, but he was in too much pain to dispute for long. The signal rocket went hissing up above the fire in the wood and burst high overhead, two green lights and one scarlet.

The Trap

THEY started in two files beside the ditches at the side of the road, keeping watch to the flanks as well as in front and to the rear. The sergeant, with his arms over Arthur Binfield's and Harry Lomax's shoulders, limped at one side of the road: O'Donovan, Chester Park and Bobby Clough on the other. Their progress was slow, but unhindered till they heard voices ahead. They halted and sent scouts in advance, who discovered Captain Blanchard despatching the last of the detachment left behind to hold the cross-roads at Oxford Circus.

When they came up he demanded to know why they were off the return route ordered for the sub-section.

"Because we have a casualty with us, sir. He's not fit to go across country, and there isn't a spare stretcher."

"Who is it?"

"Sergeant Cluny, sir."

"Are you in command, O'Donovan?"

"That's right, sir," the sergeant explained as he dragged himself near. "Corporal Gosdaile was killed yonder, just this side of the wire. I told O'Donovan to take his place."

"All right. We must make the best of it. You know your way from here?"

"Are ye no coming with us, sir?" Sergeant Cluny asked.

The captain shook his head. "I'm going to scout down this way"—he pointed west along the Coast Road—"to see if we've left any one behind there. You might let me have a man as a runner."

He selected Harry Lomax, who followed him with his rifle at the ready.

"Come on," said O'Donovan. "If we stay here much longer, Jerry'll be all round us."

"He's coming now."

It was Chester Park who first saw the headlamps, three miles away, perhaps four, along the Coast Road, but coming from the east, from the opposite direction to that taken by the captain. At the same moment Arthur Binfield said: "Poor old Cluny's gone."

Turning, they saw the little sergeant hanging limp in Binfield's arms. But Cluny was not dead: he had lost consciousness. They lowered him to the grass.

"We'll never carry him all that way, without a stretcher."

"Better get him off the road, anyway."

"Wait a minute," said Bobby Clough. He ran away, and a few moments later they heard the noise of a whirring motor from one of the parked trucks down the Avenue. He drove it up to them fast, without the lights on.

"Had an idea they mightn't be immobilised," said Bobby. "I reckon they'd only arrived here and we scared the drivers away. Came at the right time, we did."

"I ought to have thought of that," O'Donovan admitted.

He had been pleased with himself for twice taking the enemy in the rear, opening the back door to the main attack, though he remembered that he would have delayed in the Avenue, waiting for reinforcements. It was because of Sergeant Cluny that the raid was successful. Cluny had seen in an instant that everything depended on speed, that the opportunity was theirs only if they took it at once. Now the sergeant was unable to help them: nothing but will-power had brought him so far as this, with that hole torn in his leg and the shattered ends of bone grinding on each other.

Standing beside the body of the sergeant—he looked very small now, no bigger than a boy, stretched unconscious on the grass in the darkness—O'Donovan felt a momentary fissure of weakness in his mind. Just as when, after Evan Morgan had been killed by British bullets, a peremptory officer, who neither apologised for his own mistakes nor praised the good work of his subordinates, proved to be Carol Blanchard's brother, the youngest of all these commando men suddenly lost awareness of

himself as a soldier. The integrity imposed by his will crumbled away: he was merely Emmet O'Donovan, a nineteen-year-old, a romantic, who had no wish to kill or be killed, who wanted only to be away from here, to be back with his pencils and his brushes, with his day-dreams, with the girl he loved, the girl he could not think of, even so hurriedly and distractedly as now, without a myriad tender and gentle joys, sprung of memory and hope, flooding into his mind to strip him of all his armour of soldierly purpose.

The weakness was so dominant that he had to shake himself physically from head to foot to be rid of it, to regain his grip upon the hazards of the present moment. He blamed himself as he realised the opportunity which he had missed, which they had all missed: the whole Commando might have been driven back in these German trucks, ten times as swiftly and at least as safely.

Chester Park and Arthur Binfield had lifted the sergeant on to the lowered tailboard.

"Jump up beside me," Bobby Clough called from the driver's seat.

But O'Donovan had a new idea. He had put on his other personality again, experimental, assertive, self-confident. He looked to the right along the Coast Road: the headlamps were still visible, several pairs of them, but no nearer.

He signalled Chester Park and Arthur Binfield to get down from the truck.

"Drive as far down the Avenue as you can," he told Bobby. "It goes close to the cliffs. If you can't get help there, you must carry the sergeant yourself, on your back. He's only a little un, and it won't be far."

"What are you going to do?"

"Prepare something for those chaps down the road. We'll be all right. Off you go."

The truck lurched unsteadily over the cross-roads, with a noisy gear change, and then disappeared.

"Now," said O'Donovan. "Along the road there, there's a transport column of Jerry troops. Maybe armoured cars. Maybe

tanks. Reinforcements, anyhow. They've halted because they can see the fire still burning back in the wood."

"They're not the only ones who can see that. Here comes some of our bombers to finish the job."

It was true. Aircraft, heavy-laden, for the engines pulsed with a slow, labouring resonance, were passing, unlocatable, overhead, and to confirm their British identity flak guns from miles around wakened into activity: the muzzle flashes could be seen scattered round a great irregular semi-circle, ten miles or more across, and shells were bursting under the high unbroken clouds, some large and infrequent, others fighting upward in rapid successions of globular brilliance. The searchlights, also, were busy again.

"They got on to one of 'em!" exclaimed Arthur Binfield.

Caught in a long shaft of incandescence which splayed out, higher up, against the underside of the clouds, the bomber seemed small, frail, slow, its wings and fuselage glittering with a greenish phosphorescence. It looked for all the world like the glow-worm Bobby Clough had marvelled over in the grass, as pretty and as helpless, for other beams swung rapidly in to catch it, and round it now the flak was bursting in brief ejaculations of orange and scarlet flame.

"They don't lose much time, those Jerry gunners."

But even while they watched apprehensively, the bomber climbed safely into the cloud, and could no longer be seen.

"They'll be waiting for him when he comes out again."

"Ay, but he can't miss that target. See it miles away."

"Never mind about that," said O'Donovan. "We'd better look after our own job. Those reinforcements have got to be stopped. If they catch up with our chaps on the way back to the cliffs, it'll be a massacre. Can you drive?" he asked Binfield.

The countryman shook his head.

"O.K. You keep watch then."

To Chester Park he said: "Help me get three of these trucks out on to the road. One down at that end—I'll do that myself. The other two up here by the cross-roads.

They turned the ignition switches with knife blades, and, as they felt for starters and accelerators, they heard bombs explod-

ing behind them: the R.A.F. were finishing off the radio location station. Or perhaps the bombers had been called in merely to create a diversion and enable the Commando to get safely away?

O'Donovan turned his truck to the right at the cross-roads, the driving-wheel heavy and clumsy in his hands, and drove down the Coast Road almost to the end of the wall, opposite the point where they had first entered the spinney. He backed on to the grass, into shadow, where the truck could easily be driven forward again and across the road.

Returning on foot, he found that the American had brought two more trucks as far as the cross-roads.

"Notice these jobs are right-hand drive? They're British. Captured at Dunkirk, I suppose."

"Good," said O'Donovan. "Now we can use 'em to get a bit of our own back. Where's that blasted column got to?"

"They switched their headlamps off as soon as those bombs dropped."

"Scared of being seen and hit. Still, they can't hang back for ever. They'll be coming. We'll have to listen for them. This is the idea. That truck"—he pointed to one of the two Chester Park had brought up from the Avenue—"isn't to be damaged. That's the one we get away in. The other one—here, I'll shove it across the road myself."

He climbed into the cab and backed the long truck across the Coast Road, short of where the Avenue crossed it, so that there was only a yard or two of clearance between truck and wall at either end.

"Now, that blocks the head of the column. You wait here, Arthur, and as soon as the first Jerry comes up, you pull the pin out of a Mills and shove it in here. That's the petrol tank." He unscrewed the filler cap. "As soon as the bomb explodes, the truck'll catch fire."

"Where do I go after that?"

"You run for your life and get into that other truck. Use your rifle if anyone comes after you. But look out for America and me. We're going down to the far end of the wall, where the other truck is. We'll drive it out behind the rear of the column,

or anyhow behind as much of the column as we can. It's a trap, see? We get them on the road here, shut in by walls, with a blazing truck at each end. That ought to hold 'em up for a bit—long enough for all our chaps to get away from the beach."

"How you think of these things," said Arthur Binfield, "has me beat."

"Listen!"

They all stood perfectly still, holding their breath. The guns had stopped and the sound of engines and tyres on the road was unmistakable.

"Come on."

With Chester Park at his side, O'Donovan raced down the road, running on the grass verge beside the ditch, till they came to the truck he had left beside the wall.

"Hell, I've used up all my Mills."

O'Donovan produced two of the small cast-iron grenades and handed them over.

"I'll drive her out," he whispered.

They lay flat under the tail of the truck. The German column was very near now. If it proved to be a very long column they had little chance of escaping alive. If it halted to investigate a truck parked at the roadside, they were as good as dead, with their project thwarted. But the first vehicle passed them without any application of brakes. It rumbled steadily on, a noisy shadow sliding among silent, motionless shadows. It seemed huge as they looked up from the roadside grass between fingers laced across their faces to hide any gleam from their eyes. Another. Another. All armoured cars. Then a light tank. Two, four, six light tanks. Then a pair of open trucks with helmeted Germans staring uneasily over the sides: but they stared across the top of the wall, at the spinney and the fields, not down at the margins of the road. There was a shout in front, and a squeaking of abruptly applied brakes. The column fitted into the road trap quite nicely.

O'Donovan jumped to his feet and climbed^{*} into the cab of the truck. He felt very high up there, very exposed: it seemed impossible that the Germans should not notice him. The warm engine started at once, he slid in the gear lever, the truck ran

forward across the road, twenty yards behind the tail of the column. The Germans noticed them but still did not realise what was happening till the grenade exploded in the petrol tank under the chassis. By that time O'Donovan was on the ground again. The explosion sent a powerful blast of hot air against him, scorching his face. The blood drummed in his ears, his eyes smarted. He recovered himself and leaped to the angle of the wall where Chester Park awaited him. They tore through the spinney, making a lot of noise. But there was so much shooting from the road that it seemed no one had heard them.

The flames leaping up from the forward truck which blocked the head of the column were a good guide. They came out of the spinney, behind the empty cottage, crossed the Coast Road at a run and into the Avenue, where the getaway truck lay hidden. Arthur Binfield was not so slow-witted nor so ignorant of mechanics after all: he had the engine running.

Chester Park slipped into the driving-seat, released the brake, engaged the gears.

"Left lock, left lock!" O'Donovan shouted.

"I'm more used to trucks than you," said the American, spinning the wheel.

They were away! The glare from the flaming petrol at the cross-roads lessened on the macadam, dwindled to a rosy flush in the driving mirror.

They thought, but could not be sure, that a few shots were fired after them. The truck's speed mounted to thirty-two miles an hour on the dial: they dare not go faster without lights.

O'Donovan leaned out and looked back.

"That's the devil of a fire," he said. "That's more than a fire! Yes, it is! One of our planes is bombing that column. There goes another bomb."

"Lovely target, all halted and lighted up for 'em. I suppose you thought of that, too? You ought to be a general. Come to the States after the war and I'll see they make you governor of North Carolina *and* South Carolina. Boy! Have we given old Hitler a headache tonight! I'll say we have."

"It wasn't part of my idea," O'Donovan explained, "to get the

column bombed. That was luck. But, of course, the R.A.F.'ll be looking for fires to-night."

"Sure they are. What more do they want? A whole lot of tanks and armoured cars, jammed tight on the road and all lit up for them. I reckon the pilots ought to buy us a few drinks when we get back. We must pay 'em a visit."

They were both heady with excitement and satisfaction, until Arthur Binfield said soberly: "I suppose you realise we're not on the Avenue?"

"What!"

"Say, what d'you mean, not on the Avenue?"

"You turned left as soon as we started. We're on the Coast Road, heading west."

"Christ Almighty! And where does this lead to?"

None of them knew.

"I'm a born bloody fool," said Chester Park, speaking with reflective deliberation.

"It was my fault. I told you to turn left. I remember now. I must have got mixed up."

"It's a mistake any one might make," said the American. "Hell, we had no time to think. Those Jerries were only a few yards away."

"What had we better do now?"

"Keep on. Can't go back now, that's a certainty. Maybe we'll be able to turn off this road soon, and head back to the coast. Cheer up kid. We'll come out O.K."

But O'Donovan was beyond reach of consolation. He shuddered, not with cold, for the sweat was still hot all over his body, but with humiliation. He had come through this raid in a state of exaltation, sustained by an inward conception of himself as a leader, mastering men and weapons and tactics, overcoming all obstacles by daring and skill and resolution. He had achieved three successive triumphs—and then spoiled everything by a stupid misapprehension, made in a calamitous second or two. As a result he and two comrades who had put their trust in him were now cut off. If they ever found their way back to the cliff-tops, it would be too late. The Commando rule was absolute: there could be no waiting for stragglers.

He felt very tired, and as if he were a stranger to himself, as if body and mind had fallen apart into two entities, lost, wandering in space, seeking each other desperately but in vain. He could see no farther into the future. The truck without lights, hurtled on in the darkness. Chester Park, at the wheel, whistled as he drove. O'Donovan envied his serenity.

On the Jetty

THE harbour was very small, a lopsided rectangle of smooth water enclosed by a headland and a broad stone jetty most of which was overshadowed by a sloping roof of corrugated iron. The commando ship had berthed at one side of the jetty so that the wounded had only to be taken down the gangways and across the cobbled paving to the hospital train that had been waiting all night. The morning was soft and hazy, the sun disclosing itself gradually above the chalk hills to the east. Escorting destroyers stood off a little way, communicating with the shore by launches and gigs. The jetty belonged to the commando men, who roamed here and there, knotting into groups for the exchange of experiences, drinking hot tea and coffee supplied by the canteen, many of them eating a second breakfast.

The grime and sweat of battle was still thick upon them: in the morning light they looked like solid phantoms with their torn and stained equipment and their grease-darkened faces under the piratical wool caps. Their rifles and their guns alone were cleaned: they had seen to that on the ship during the return voyage. Most of them were more excited now than at any time during the raid itself: only in retrospect did the reality of what they had accomplished and undergone waken vividly in their minds. They were now beginning to see themselves as players in a drama, and this pleasing sensation was heightened by the activities of press photographers, a van with a cinema-camera mounted on the roof, and the reporters in mackintoshes and soft hats who asked questions and now and again pushed their way into a wooden hut at the landward end, to scribble

into notebooks and dispute for the use of telephones. Because they enjoyed being on display, the commando men did not greatly resent the presence of the military policemen, with blue cloth covers to their caps to denote that they were on security duty, who guarded, with a number of Royal Marines, all the approaches from the main station and the little town straggling up the hillside.

Bobby Clough had searched the ship for O'Donovan and Chester Park and Arthur Binfield: no one, it seemed, had seen them after dispersal, under the colonel's orders, for the return journey to the cliff-tops. Bobby, however, learned that three assault-boats had been damaged by gunfire from the shore, and the survivors taken aboard destroyers. He fastened his hopes to the destroyers which had not yet disembarked any commando men. Meanwhile Bobby was concerned for Cluny. He had carried the sergeant on his back across the French fields, after abandoning the truck in the Avenue, and with help had lowered him, cradled in a surgical jacket, from the cliff-top to the beach. Now he watched orderlies carry him ashore at this English port.

Cluny was wrapped in heavy brown blankets, his small pallid face quite still on the pillow, and clean, the stains washed away, the tiny pitted shrapnel wounds dabbed with iodine, and an "M" scrawled with crayon on his forehead to denote that morphine had been injected. The " $\frac{1}{2}$ " after the "M," Bobby learned, meant half a grain. He followed the stretcher on to the hospital train, carrying a pocket-wallet, letters, keys, a fountain-pen and other oddments he had picked up on the ship: Cluny, in accordance with standing orders, had left them behind before the raid began. Bobby found a nurse, who was not unduly impressed when he called her "Sister" at the end of every sentence. He gave the sergeant's "personal effects" into her keeping, and begged her to devote special care and attention to this patient because he was a grand soldier and an intimate friend of Bobby Clough. In return he received an assurance that the sergeant was not likely to lose his life, that he would be operated on as soon as he reached hospital, and would be kept unconscious till then.

"Will he lose his leg, Sister?" Bobby asked.

"That's more than I can say. Even the doctor wouldn't know yet. We'll do our best for him, be sure of that."

Two more stretcher-cases arrived and the nurse hurried away with a starchy rustle. Bobby left the train. Back on the jetty he saw that other stretchers were being brought ashore and laid in rows on the paving sets opposite the bow of the ship. On these stretchers no faces showed: on each a single blanket was drawn up over the head of the unmoving body underneath. Bobby walked across and as he came nearer he saw that labels were pinned to the blankets. He read half a dozen before he came to one from his own sub-section: 927299, Gosdaile, Cpl. W. H. While he was bending over this stretcher, the bearers brought another. The label on this read: 560354, Fletcher, F. Frank had died of his wounds on the ship. Evan Morgan's body, Bobby knew had not been brought back: Germans would search his pockets and bury him and put up a German cross over his grave in French soil.

Bobby wanted to draw back the blankets and look at Bill Gosdaile and Frank Fletcher for the last time. It did not occur to him that they were an incongruous couple, lying side by side, the worldly and the devout, the frivolous and the earnest, united only by their devotion to athletic sports, by the comradeship of soldiering, and now by death. His feelings were intense but simple: they had been his friends and now they were dead, young men who would never again fight in a roped ring or chase a football. Even if he pulled back the blankets they would not feel the fresh sea wind blowing on their faces. Bobby Clough was twenty-one. Except on the two occasions he had gone raiding with the Commando he had never seen a corpse. Till this moment he had never been confronted with a situation like this. He felt resentfully that the stretchers should already have been replaced by coffins. Coffins were more respectable. He had an idea that there was authority in convention for the ceremony of taking a farewell look at the faces of dead friends. He hoped no one would notice what he was doing, as he bent beside one of the stretchers and gently drew away the scarlet-hemmed blanket. Then he dropped it hastily for what he saw was not the broad-featured blond good looks of the Bill Gosdaile he had

known, but a mutilated horror; the toothy rictus, slack-jawed yet rigid, with one pale protruding eyeball, unlidged, unseeing, was more terrifying than the wound.

He wandered away, depressed and disconsolate. He noticed Harry Lomax talking vehemently and noisily to the men of another sub-section. Then a civilian came up, an oldish man, broad-shouldered, with a seamed, serious face, and asked: "Is your name Clough? Did you know O'Donovan?"

"Yes," said Bobby. He was being careful: they had all been warned to be careful in speaking to newspaper men.

"Where is he? What's become of him?"

"I don't know."

"I've been talking to Captain Blanchard—he told me he left O'Donovan at a cross-roads. The place you called Oxford Circus. After the radio location station had been blown up."

"That's right."

"Were you there?"

"Ay, I was there. Grabbed a Jerry truck, I did, to drive the sergeant back, as near to the cliff top as I could get. I thought they'd all come along with me in the trucks, but at the last moment O'Donovan seemed to change his mind."

"Who do you mean by all?"

"Look here," said Bobby, "what do you want to know for? Are you going to print this in your blasted paper?"

"No. I've got a personal interest. In O'Donovan, I mean, I—well, I know his girl. I want to be able to tell her."

"I never knew he had a girl," Bobby exclaimed suspiciously.

The moment he had spoken he remembered the night they left for the coast, before the raid, before they went on the commando trip. There had been a girl there, in the black-out, when they were waiting to get into the trucks, O'Donovan had been seen with her, holding her hand, before he moved away out of sight. All that seemed years and years ago. Everything before you knew who she was. And now you want us to believe Morgan and Frank Fletcher and Corporal Gosdaile had been alive then. And—yes, it was Bill Gosdaile who had thought the girl looked rather like Captain Blanchard's sister. Gosdaile was amused at the idea, not really taking it seriously, and Evan

Morgan said: "Could not get off with her yourself, in the train, before you knew who she was. And now you want us to believe she is kissing and cuddling with O'Donovan." They were all sceptical but all fascinated, without taking it seriously, by the suggestion that the sister of an officer known to them (a pukka officer, too, a peace-time regular) might be linked by the common denominator of lovemaking to one of their own comrades. It was a fantastic jest within their minds, as they waited in the black-out before quitting a village they had seen for the first time only a few days earlier: they delighted in it because, fantastic as it seemed, the idea served to confound the strict order of their small disciplined world. When O'Donovan came back they threw a few sly jokes at him, not daring to mention Gosdaile's guess at the girl's identity, for that was too far-fetched for outright speech. The next morning they were put on the ship with a new raid in front of them, so they forgot all about it. Bill Gosdaile was dead, and Evan Morgan too, and Bobby Clough had never given the idea another thought. Not till now.

"But what's happened to O'Donovan?" the older man persisted.

"I wish to God I knew. He didn't come back with us on the ship. Nor did Park and Binfield. They were with him when I left. I'm hoping they're on one of the destroyers. Are you sure O'Donovan had a girl?"

The journalist nodded.

"She wouldn't be"—Bobby took a chance—"name of Blanchard, I suppose?"

The older man was a little too slow in concealing his expression.

"It's all right," said Bobby. "I can keep my trap shut. Besides, O'Donovan's a pal o' mine. I was a damn fool to agree. I ought never to have let the three of them stay behind at those blasted cross-roads."

The relief of surrendering his confidences lured him on: you could talk to a stranger you'd probably never see again, you could say things you'd never dream of saying to chaps in the Commando.

* "It's funny, in a raid. Different from anything that happens

over here. I don't mean just the danger, and the noise of the guns, and chaps getting killed. I lost three good mates last night. Three that I know of. But what I mean is, you don't feel the same inside. You go all cold and tight. Me, most of the time I feel a bit sick, like I'd been eating bad fish. Other chaps—take O'Donovan now. He's been an eye-opener for all of us. Used to think he was a bit too quiet for this Commando game. Bit soft. But not your life. He enjoyed himself all right. And he was good, too. Got brains, you know. Thinks quick, and acts quick. Soon as Corporal Gosdaile went west, Sergeant Cluny put O'Donovan in his place. Quite right, too. Then when the sergeant got his packet, O'Donovan took command. Only a kid he is, but it seemed natural."

"A born soldier, eh?"

"That's about it. Funny! But you never know what a chap's really like till you've seen him under fire."

"A lot of us found that out in the last war."

"Oh! You were in the army then?"

"Four years of it. France—infantry."

Bobby felt consoled: it didn't seem so bad, yammering his head off, if the old geezer had been a swaddy himself in his time.

"Look! They're bringing some of our boys off from that destroyer. Let's go and see if there's any o' my pals among 'em."

They waited patiently while two launches full of commando men crossed the harbour and drew in beside the jetty, astern of the ship.

"Can't see 'em," said Bobby.

The men began to come ashore, shouting and laughing and waving to friends. Bobby knew most of them. But, "O'Donovan's not there!" said the journalist.

"No, nor Chester Park. Nor Arthur Binfield. Looks like they'd all got scuppered."

A tall young man with a round, aggressive face joined them. His East London accent was high-pitched compared with Bobby Clough's Lancashire vowels and lip-strangled consonants.

"Not a bloody sign of 'em," he said. "How did you get back, Bobby?"

"Drove a truck down the Avenue, with the old sarge in it. Carried him over the fields on my back."

"Good job he's only a little 'un."

"What about you, Harry?"

"Oh, me and the captain fought our way through all right."

"I'll bet you didn't see a single bloody Jerry all the way," said Bobby sceptically.

"Matter of fact, we didn't. Tell you what I did see, though. When we was about half-way back. A fire at them cross-roads where I left you and the others. Oxford Circus. And then a big explosion. Know anything about that?"

"Nowt."

"Why didn't they come back with you?" the Cockney asked.

"Don't ask me. O'Donovan was up to something. That's all I know."

"Maybe he set fire to them other trucks?"

"Maybe he did. And it looks as if they all got cut off doing it. Only you and me left, Harry, out of our little lot. And the sarge."

"Is he going to be all right?"

"I think so. I saw him on the hospital train."

"I wish Captain Blanchard hadn't taken me off as his runner. I didn't want to go."

"You was doing a good job, making sure none of our chaps was left behind on that Coast Road. Did you find any?"

"Not a bleeding one. Wasn't long either before we was legging it back to the cliffs, hard as we could go. If we'd only known O'Donovan and the other two was stuck back there—I pointed out that fire to the captain, when we heard the big bump. But he said there was no use waiting any longer."

During this conversation the journalist had stood back a few paces, realising that the two rough-mannered young soldiers were, in their own indirect fashion, comforting each other as they slowly recovered from the shock of losing so many friends. Nevertheless, he heard every word they spoke. When the Cockney hurried off to surrender his unexpended ammunition—a large pile of magazines and chargers was being formed on a spread blanket farther along the jetty—the commando man from Manchester turned to him. "Mind if I ask you a question?"

"Of course not."

"What we was talking about before—O'Donovan's girl. Did Captain Blanchard know what was going on?"

Alexander Brind paused for a moment before he answered. Then he said: "Yes, he did."

"You're sure?"

"She told him herself. I was there."

"And I suppose he didn't like it? His sister going with a private soldier?"

"Not exactly. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wondered."

The young soldier stood silent for a moment, looking past the other man's shoulder, out to the harbour waters. Then he said suddenly: "Are you a snob, mister?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, what I say is—Why shouldn't they? Mind you. I don't know much about it. O'Donovan never said a word to me. It was his own affair. No one else's. Except the girl. But suppose they happened to fall in love with each other, what's wrong with that? Just because she's what they call a lady. I don't hold with class distinctions. He's as good as her any day."

"That's what Miss Blanchard thinks herself."

"Does she now? She must be a fine girl. Tell me, mister. What do you think about it?"

"I'm on their side. I want them to be happy. They're taking a risk. Still, every one who gets married does that. But that's not the trouble now."

"Will she mind very much? Him being missing, I mean."

"It will nearly kill her. She's that sort."

Bobby Clough considered this. "I think it'd be better if you and me said nothing to nobody about this, mister."

"We may get news of O'Donovan and the other two yet."

"Bit late now," said Bobby Clough. "I wouldn't mind so much if I only knew for certain what happened to them."

"I expect they've been captured."

"Not while they had any ammo left."

The hospital train had drawn out, and another, a line of ordinary Southern Railway passenger coaches without red crosses

painted on the sides, was steaming on to the jetty. Loud voices were shouting: "Fall in! Every man fall in! Get a move on now."

"See you some time, perhaps." For the first time, as he moved away, the young commando man looked tired.

Alexander Brind felt desolate. He had his report to rough out and telephone to Fleet Street; personal impressions of the Commando's return, interwoven with a few first-hand narratives by officers and men. Such of it as survived the censorship would make a lively supplement to the official story of a daring and highly successful raid. After that, he realised, he would have to go back to London, seek out Carol Blanchard, and tell her that, while her brother was safe, Emmet O'Donovan was "missing," which might mean dead, wounded or in a prison camp. It was a pity he had got across the girl's brother, who was cast too true to type to understand him, to make allowances. And O'Donovan was very young, headstrong, and probably tactless. He and Carol had started a rare problem when they fell in love with each other. Perhaps they would have solved it, left alone? But the war had interfered. "Missing" solved nothing. It merely left everyone in a misery of ignorance and suspense.

As he walked towards the hut marked "Press" Brind heard a sergeant-major calling: "Listen to these names. Any one who knows what happened to these men, speak up. But remember. I don't want to hear what someone else told you, only what you saw with your own eyes."

One, two, three, four, five names which he did not recognise. Then: "O'Donovan? Binfield? Park?"

And there was Bobby Clough, beginning to tell all over again what had happened at the cross-roads at Le Bandelot.

Overlooking Hyde Park

SORTING and packing clothes in the narrow bedroom overlooking Hyde Park, Carol strove to fix her thoughts on impersonal subjects. She sent them chasing after fragments of fact and commentary recollected from the morning newspapers, so that she might tell herself she was taking an intelligent interest in the war. Hitler had attacked Russia, and the Russians now were withdrawing slowly before the onslaught along a huge front. That meant either that Hitler had gone completely crazy or else that his armies were stronger even than any one had dared suppose. But at least Britain, after the past twelve months of bitter endurance, was no longer alone in the fight. And the United States would come in sooner or later: all the newspaper experts, including dear old Alexander Brind, were beseeching the British public not to be impatient with American delays, explaining the involved eighteenth-century technique of American politics, recalling that America did not enter the 1914-18 war till two years after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and emphasising the value of Lease-Lend material and the Atlantic patrols.

But to Carol both Russia and America seemed very far away. When she thought of the war she thought of Emmet O'Donovan, dead or wounded or a prisoner in a Nazi Stalag; her thoughts beat unavailingly against those three unresolved alternatives. Every night she lay for long sleepless hours in bed, thinking about Emmet in a misery of stupefied bewilderment, with grief and fear and resentment aching in her heart. Every night the same ordeal awaited her, no matter how tired her body and mind. Therefore while the day lasted, while she was still on

her feet, she tried to be so busy that she had no opportunity to think or to feel.

Now she was preparing to quit this Lancaster Gate bedroom where for nearly twelve months she had slept almost every night, descending in the morning to join other well-turned-out girls in neat, expensive, faintly theatrical uniforms, and spend the day in rarely arduous warwork, usually between Mayfair, St. James's, Knightsbridge and Whitehall. All this she was at last, and gladly, giving up. Her only regret was that she had not made the decision long ago, that she was not already absorbed, with the burden of her personal grief, into a rougher, less sheltered routine. Her new life would begin the next day, when she reported to draw a third-class railway warrant, a day's pay (one shilling and fourpence) and a few extra pennies to cover the cost of the food she must buy in crowded railway buffets during the journey.

Meanwhile, she had to pack her bags and vacate this room, and the task left her mind free to pursue its own thoughts. They must be about the war, but not the war as it had struck at Emmet O'Donovan and snatched him away from her. And the war, after all, was not so far away. She could see the war out of the window from this fourth-floor room: she could see it in the uniformed men and women walking in the park or sitting on the bus-tops. She could see the war in the barrage balloons floating high at the end of their cable fetters, soft and stupid like primeval animals, yet a little lovely as the summer sunshine gilded their silvery corpulence. She could see the war in the low stone parapet at the edge of the park, scarred with the stumps of iron railings torn away to yield scrap metal; in the huts and the fire-trenches and shelter-trenches in the park itself, and here and there, under the trees where for centuries Londoners with an hour or two to spare had strolled or sat indolently, the belts of coiled and rusty barbed wire.

The trenches had been dug, and the wire entanglements erected, the previous summer, the summer of Dunkirk and the capitulation of France, the summer of everlasting sinister sunshine when Spitfires and Hurricanes sent the Nazi day-raiders smoking down to British earth out of the tall blue skies, and

every day and every night the Nazi parachute troops were expected. Carol thought of herself as she was then, a girl unawakened, oblivious of the world changing about her, childishy stirred, childishy ignorant, clamped like a candle in a candlestick by all the rigid conventions of her upbringing, which she never then suspected to be brittle and insecure. She had been quite content to take the war as a personal excitement, a pageant transforming only the surface of her world, a pageant in which she could look pretty with a uniform and a fancy cap and coloured badges, all designed between Hanover Square and Pall Mall, and for the most part flaunted there. Even the bombing of London, night after night from September to May, the houses and office buildings, the churches and railway stations torn by high explosives and burned out by incendiaries that began with a bluish-green glow and rapidly turned to red and white and yellow flames and black smoke—even the bombing had not shaken her out of her pretty girl's pretty conception of war. It had needed Emmet O'Donovan to do that: Emmet who had never asked her what she contributed to the fight against Hitler, who accepted her joyfully for what she was, as if that were more than he merited: Emmet who had pushed himself into the war, a volunteer, a year before he was compelled to soldier, and, choosing the most dangerous prospect open to him, was now—what? Dead? Wounded? A prisoner? These were questions best kept till night, till solitude captured her finally at the end of the lonely day.

She closed a suit-case, snapping the locks into place, and began to look through letters before she tore them up and scattered the fragments into the wastepaper basket. Emmet's letter—the only letter he had written her, the letter he wrote before he set out on this last Commando raid, the letter she did not receive till Alexander Brind had called to tell her that Emmet was "missing" and no one knew what had become of him—this letter, already unfolded and folded again so often that the paper was wearing thin at the creases, lay safely in the leather wallet she carried, like a man, like a soldier, in her breast pocket.

She hoped that her new duties in the A.T.S., the women's

corps where she would be authentically a member of the British Army, would bring her not only hard work but danger. Almost she could wish that the bombing of London had not ceased with the summer, so that in her new personality she might experience, fully, without stint or remorse, the impact of war. She had missed the last big raid, in May, when the night-fighters had shot down thirty-three raiders but the Temple and Serjeant's Inn and St. Clement Danes, and the House of Commons had all been cracked open or set on fire; yet she could not regret that last lost opportunity of experience, for it fell in the week-end when, forty miles away in the country, she had learned the truth about herself and about Emmet O'Donovan. All that circumstance had given them of each other was crowded into that one week-end. Many people would say the time was insufficient for love, and only an infatuation could bloom so swiftly. She smiled, bitterly defiant, as she thought of the comments that wisdom would make, and rejected them all. Merely to imagine the cautions and calculations of less fortunate men and women filled her with the certitude of natural faith. Though she was unable to phrase her thoughts, she believed all the dimensions of space and time to be subject to the evaluations of the spirit. She believed that a few precious hours, seized gladly, might yield more than year stacked stolidly after year till the count passed into decades and generations. She was young and the future could not intimidate her. She believed that what she had had of Emmet and he of her, in one evening and an afternoon together, and in a distraught farewell on a dark roadside, would endure in their hearts for ever.

Her thoughts flurried away again. She was afraid she might begin to think of Emmet as dead. That was how, sinfully despairing, she felt in the loneliness of the night. She must be strong. She must hold fast to hope. She must keep Emmet alive in her thoughts. That was what his mother had told her. She had gone to the village, a village north of London, still distinct but clearly foredoomed by the outstretching of railways and roads and building estates to become a suburb, to call on Mrs. O'Donovan, terrified but determined to see her because she was Emmet's mother. Age-old traditions, satirical, nerve-

ridden, cast warning shadows over their meeting: it was ordained that the woman who had given birth to a man should not meet the woman he chose for wife without secret or open hostility.

The meeting, however, was not so great an ordeal after all. They were shy with each other at first, sitting over tea in a little top-floor flat, with opened exercise books scattered about, on the tables and chairs, even on the floor. Emmet's mother had no gift for tidiness. But she did not weep and she did not resent Carol's existence. Perhaps that was because she had long been a widow, with the independence of a woman who works for her own livelihood: she was senior history mistress at a secondary school, a little prim in her thoughts perhaps, but otherwise not at all what Carol had imagined a schoolmistress to be. She was Emmet's mother: the resemblance was most apparent in her tall, trim, slender figure, in the clear blue eyes and dark lashes under curved dark brows (though her hair was grey), and the faint hollowing of the cheeks. Mrs. O'Donovan had what Emmet lacked, an Irish intonation to her voice. After twenty minutes Carol could almost hear her own thoughts: I like her. And, curiosity appeased, she knew that her liking was returned.

Mrs. O'Donovan accepted the course of events. She took it as natural that her son and this stranger girl should have met and fallen in love all within a few days. She was quite willing to contemplate the prospect of their marriage when the war ended. She believed that Emmet was a prisoner of war: "I don't feel that he is dead," she explained, as if her desire were sufficient to keep him alive.

"I know it's not rational," she went on. "I know other women have lost their sons, and no doubt felt it as sorely as I should. But there it is: if he were dead, I should feel it at once in my heart."

Yet they were both aware that at any moment a telegram might arrive, a few words of regret formalised by the War Office, to rip to pieces all their hopeful fortitude. Already they had begun to hold fast to each other, for comfort. And Carol was troubled by tiny unlocatable stings of guilt: it came more

naturally to her to like this woman, this schoolmistress, this stranger mother of her stranger sweetheart, than to like her own mother.

Unconsciously, in her own room overlooking Hyde Park, which to-morrow would no longer be her own room, she had stopped work and stood looking out of the window, seeing nothing, as she remembered the afternoon spent with the middle-aged schoolmistress who was Emmet's mother. She had told what she had not intended to tell, how she had met Emmet and a little of what she felt towards him. Mrs. O'Donovan had begun to talk about him and, perhaps also without intending it, had revealed a good deal about herself. Carol remembered almost every word, because it concerned Emmet also.

"I'm glad about you," Mrs. O'Donovan had said. "Because it's important for Emmet to have a good wife. Of course you have faults! But you're not flimsy in your mind. And you hold on to what you want. If you weren't like that, you wouldn't have come to see me. I didn't even know you existed. It would have been quite easy for you to stay away."

"I'm rather weak-willed, really," she had protested.

"Not about what matters to you. That's Emmet. He's my only child, you know. I'll tell you another reason why I don't believe he's dead. I suppose it's not rational either, but it counts with me. He has such a lot to live for."

"You mean—his painting? He gave me some sketches, and I got Mr. Brind—I told you about him—to show them to people who understand, people whose opinion is worth having."

"And what did they say?" Mrs. O'Donovan had demanded, suddenly defensive, the softness gone from her voice.

"They said they were good. They want to know a lot more about Emmet. They think he has a future."

"Emmet knows himself how good his work is, or how bad. Didn't you trust his own opinion?"

"Yes. Though he wanted to throw them away. But I thought I could help. I wanted the critics and the picture galleries to know about him."

Mrs. O'Donovan's manner changed.

"That's all right. But, you see, you don't quite understand

about Emmet. He is going to be a very good painter. A great painter, maybe. But he must make his own way. Lots of people have talent. Quite a few have genius, I dare say. It's what they do with their gifts that counts. Emmet knows that. I didn't tell him. He worked it out for himself. He gets his painting from his father. He hardly remembers him. And I never ran Peter down to the boy. But he found out. And he's determined his own life is to be very different."

Mrs. O'Donovan talked about her dead husband, impersonally, as if only to explain Emmet to a girl who loved him but knew too little about him. What remained in Carol's mind was a brief but sharply-defined sketch of a young doctor in Dublin with a talent for painting that led him to neglect a small practice, a man with a ready charm of manner which in time he used as an excuse for all his shortcomings, so that he failed in a few showy years both as physician and artist, and took to excessive drinking as a relief to his conscience.

"Peter was never a bad man," Mrs. O'Donovan explained. "But he could do almost anything quickly and well. He thought the rest of the world was too stupid to see through him. It wasn't. He had all the curses of Ireland laid on him, including drink at the end. It was drink killed him. When Emmet found that out, he wanted to swear an oath that he would never touch liquor. But I wouldn't let him do that. I told him it was running away from danger. I told him he had to learn to take one drink and refuse another. And about his painting, I told him only one thing: he was to satisfy himself and no one else."

Before she left, Carol had said: "Did you mind very much when Emmet volunteered for the army? And did you mind when he went into the Commandos?"

"Indeed I did. I've never ceased minding. But I knew he had to do it. He was right. He has two duties in life. He has to get the utmost out of himself as a painter. And he has to prove himself as a man."

"But he's only a boy," Carol said.

"Yes, to me. But not to himself. I know Emmet. Always he feels he has to make up for his father's failure. He has the

same gift for painting. He's determined not to waste it. But he can't make that an excuse for neglecting his other duties. He's living in a time when he has to fight or feel himself less than a man. It was impossible for Emmet not to become a soldier the first chance he got. I wonder if you can understand that?"

"Yes. I understand. He's a very good soldier, too. You know what he did in that raid on Torgsdal?"

"I heard a little about it."

And this last raid——" Carol then told her all that Alexander Brind had learned about the fights at the two cross-roads, and how Emmet had replaced first a corporal, then a sergeant.

"I see," said Mrs. O'Donovan. "Without him they'd probably have never been able to blow up the radio location place at all. That's what I expected. I hate war. But if he had to be a soldier, I'm glad he's good at it. I'm glad. I'm very glad."

It was only then that the tears came. Holding her arms about this middle-aged woman who was no longer a stranger, Carol felt in her own heart, illogically, now that Emmet's mother could no longer conceal her fears, a sudden singing certitude that Emmet was not dead; that he lived and would return to her. But almost at once she perceived what else perplexed and burdened his mother: astonishment, a protracted incredulity, that the baby she had conceived and borne and fed at her breasts was grown into a man and had added to all the gentle survivals of his childhood the faculties of a man, the desire to mate with a woman, and the desire to adventure with death. Merely by the passage of time, the baby was a baby no more, not even a boy, but a soldier, an instrument of violence and death, perhaps a victim for violence and death. The destiny of women was consummated through the instinct which impelled them to lie in a man's arms and bear him children, and the instinct betrayed them endlessly to suffering. Why then, Carol had wondered, did she resent her own virginity? Why did she long to be Emmet's wife and to be carrying his child in her body?

Staring out over the trees and the grass, the sandbags and

the rusted barbed wire of Hyde Park, remembering Emmet and his mother, she still could find no answer to that question. She was filled with anger against death, because it was the enemy of life and because, for all she knew, it had already claimed the man she loved.

The Cave

IN THE cave, it was always dark and always cold. They had been there nearly five weeks—thirty-three days according to the rough count kept by O'Donovan on a corner of the paper block that Dumesnil had brought him. In all that time they had not once been above ground. Often, when the calculations they made by their watches told them it was night outside, they climbed the long slope to the exit and, crouching behind the boulder, debated whether or not they should force their way out and take a chance among the German sentries and patrols. A few hours of freedom in the fresh air, under the stars, would have made a vast difference to their plight. But always they came back to the same insurmountable difficulty. Dumesnil said the exit was almost constantly in view of German sentries. And it was true that, lying behind the boulder, they could often hear German voices and the sounds of marching feet and rifles slapped on to shoulders or lowered to the ground. Dumesnil himself could come there only occasionally, and then only because his work took him every third night along the footpath over the headland. If they moved the boulder, except when he gave them the whispered signal, they would be seen and either shot down or captured. Even should they get safely away from the cave, it would be impossible for him to lead them back there for another three days—and there was no other place in or near the town where he could hide them. The decisive point Dumesnil made was that if they were discovered, his life would be in danger. They owed everything to him, so, grumbling and growing more and more despondent, they stayed on in the cave.

They felt they had forgotten what sunshine and warmth were

like. Above ground, outside the cave, summer was ripening to its fullness: roses would be scattering lavish petals beneath the bushes: tiny apples forming on the boughs: nestlings hatching in the hedges and the long grass: the wheat they had seen in the searchlight beam at Le Bandelot, green stalks a foot high, would now be standing tall and full-bladed, the corn swelling in the ears: the sun would be beating hot on the fertile earth fifteen hours a day. But from all that they were cut off, three British soldiers fortunate to escape their enemies after a raid, condemned to wear out day after dark day in a natural stone dungeon, with nothing to do but eat a little now and then, sleep, and shiver, and sleep again, never deeply for want of exercise. They could also talk. They all talked, by turns, even Arthur Binfield; but by now none wanted to listen to the others.

They began to fear that they would never escape from Occupied France, perhaps never escape from the cave. The last few days they had speculated, each secretly, apart, whether it would not be preferable to leave the cave without consulting old Dumesnil. When their vitality flickered a little higher than normal, they dreamed of fighting their way out, with their two rifles, their submachine-gun, their three hand grenades and the diminished stock of ammunition left in their pouches. Where fighting would lead them, and how they were to return to England unless they fell in with Dumesnil's plans, which were constantly being postponed, they could not tell. Sometimes they had crazy ideas of seizing a boat by force: sometimes their thoughts shaped to the trite and vague phrase: Better to die fighting! And when vitality was low, the only future they could foresee was to emerge, blinking and shamefaced, and surrender themselves to the first Nazi troops they met and be taken away to a prison camp.

They had come to the cave hopefully, trusting Dumesnil because he had already done them a great service, because he said that soon he would be able to procure them a boat. Soon! Thirty-three days of incessant darkness, broken only when, twice in the twenty-four hours, they lighted their candles and ate dry cold food and drank the brackish water that dripped in one corner of the cave. Candles, paper, matches and food were

all provided by Dumesnil: every third night he left a little store under the boulder which guarded the entrance to the cave. Dumesnil could give them food only by depriving himself and his family of the scanty rations the Germans allowed. He fetched their provisions to the boulder always at the risk of his life. That proved his good faith. Yet day after day ached slowly past and still he had not made good his promise to find them a boat and a chance to escape the guard on the coast. He was a fisherman permitted to put out only in daylight and never without armed German patrol boats at hand. Every third night he whispered to them for a few moments when, at his bidding, they put their shoulders to the huge stone and rolled it gently aside, and always he told them the same story: there were difficulties: German watchfulness had been sharpened, owing to the Commando raid further along the coast: they must be patient a little longer. Dumesnil was to their eyes old—well over fifty. He had soldiered in the 1914-18 war: he had two soldier sons in German prison camps. He could not speak English and he found it difficult to understand O'Donovan's French. O'Donovan was not quite sure why the old man helped them, but thought it was probably more from hatred of the *sales Boches* than for love of England or even of France. Dumesnil despised almost every one, but particularly Laval, Daladier, Darlan, Gamelin, and his own sons who had been captured in the Maginot Line. He despised every one too young to belong to his own generation. But the Germans he hated.

Driving away from Le Bandelot, they had followed the road for half an hour and then abandoned the truck, running it into a sandpit, when they saw a traffic-block ahead. Stumbling along on foot in the darkness, they had come to a village where a German road convoy was held up by a French motor-van, driven by a woman, which had broken down in the narrow main street. From the shadows the three commando men watched for a few seconds while Germans shouted curses and at last hauled the van into a side street and proceeded on their way. Immediately the woman driver lifted the bonnet, adjusted something in the engine, and was ready to drive off. O'Donovan called to her from a doorway. She peered at them as soon as she heard the

words *soldats anglais*, and then came over, and told them to move, on foot, along the road out of the village, till they came to a lane turning away to the right. Again she pretended to be repairing the engine of the truck. She picked them up at the side lane and drove them fifteen miles to the outskirts of a town, a little seaport which she said was called St. Armand. They had never seen it in daylight, for presently Dumesnil came out to them and led them slowly, cautiously, deviously, behind the harbour to the rocky headland, and so into the cave.

They were glad enough then to get under cover, to make their way, crouching, down the long narrow incline from the top of the headland to the shelf of rock where now they lived and slept. The shelf stood about ten feet above the seawater slapping and swirling in the main body of the cave. That was at high tide: when the tide receded, the water sank another six or seven feet below the shelf, and then they could sometimes see a faint glitter of light on the surface. The cave opened at the other end, Dumesnil had told them, through a narrow entrance, a hole in the cliff-side of the headland, overlooking the harbour entrance. At low tide there was a clearance of about eighteen inches between the water level and the top of this hole: not enough for a boat to enter, though a swimmer might have come and gone, and air, as well as a little indirect daylight, then came into the cave. Sometimes the sound of voices, faint but clear, floated in to them when the tide was low: sometimes they heard the splash of oars or the splutter of a petrol engine. They found these noises exciting and reassuring.

When the incoming tide filled the lower basin, they could no longer see the water, and they had to keep well away from the edge of the rock shelf: once Chester Park, tossing in sleep, had almost rolled over. High tide in the cave was signified for them also by the increased difficulty they felt in breathing: the rising water compressed the air already there up towards the rock roof, unseen in the darkness. Dumesnil said there were a few small vents there, rifts and cracks in the rock. They had never been able to find them, but they guessed the old Frenchman's information was correct: the boulder stopped all but a few inches of the landward entrance and, had there been no

other air passages into the cave, they would have been stifled every time the tide rose.

According to Dumesnil, the cave was unknown to the Germans, and to most of the French people living close at hand. The boulder looked to be no different from many others strewn on the hillside—St. Armand, it seemed, was outside the chalk country they had fought over at Le Bandelot—and there was plenty of turf and thick grass round its base. Strength was needed to move it, and then it rolled only a few inches. The cave was not even charted on maps and the dry part of it was too small to have been of use, in the past, to smugglers. Dumesnil had known it as a boy, forgotten it, and remembered it again when the German troops came to occupy St. Armand. O'Donovan guessed he had thought of the cave first as a place where he might dispose of dead German bodies, if he were fortunate enough to find an opportunity to assassinate a sentry or two. Now he had hidden away three British commando men there: and they felt themselves rotting, body and mind, while they waited for him to procure the promised boat.

"We'll go off our nuts in here," said Arthur Binfield.

"The hell with that," said Chester Park. "We'll never get so screwy we can't make a dash for it."

They had a candle lighted while they ate the cold baked fish and bread Dumesnil had brought them, but O'Donovan, having gulped his share quickly, was sitting close to the candle flame again, making drawings. He had long since used every sheet of the block of writing-paper and his pencil was worn to a stub. Now he was searching the scrawled sheets for corners of white, filling in tiny sketches alongside larger ones. At first he had drawn all kinds of things: trees, cows, children, boats—lots of boats—houses, churches, flowers, and portraits of Arthur Binfield and Chester Park. They had approved then, exclaiming with admiration over his entertaining facility. They had been especially impressed because he could make "pictures from memory. But they had long since wearied of watching the restless pencil. Besides, O'Donovan always drew the same thing now in his miniature sketches worked into blank corners, often overlapping other pencil lines: it was always the head of a girl,

and always the same girl. A good-looking girl, too, though not a type which either the American or the man from Berkshire admired.

"He's a bit queer already," Arthur Binfield whispered. "He'll be the first to go."

O'Donovan seemed to hear nothing: his pencil moved on as rapidly as ever.

"Why can't he draw something else? Why does he only do her head? What sort of a woman is she, anyway? Hasn't she got a body? No arms, no legs, nothing except a head—she ought to be in a freak show."

"Shut up!" said O'Donovan, but he did not lift his eyes, searching for another sheet with a square inch of paper still unpencilled.

"This place stinks. No wonder old Frenchy never comes into it."

"Yeah," said Chester Park. "I been thinking about that too. Sometimes I wonder if he wants us to die here? Slowly. But then he brings us food and water regular."

"If you can call it food."

"It's keeping us alive, buddy. He's doing without his own rations to feed us."

"I suppose he is. But I wish to God I was out of this cave. We never ought to have come here."

O'Donovan spoke at last. "That's true, anyhow," he agreed. "We ought never to have come."

"Candle's getting low, you guys. Time to put it out."

The American lifted the candle, held it high so that when he blew out the flame the wick would not gutter and smell, and put the stump into his pocket as the darkness clenched around them again, impalpable, dimensionless, chill, due to prevail for long hours to come.

"What the hell did you do that for?" O'Donovan demanded. "I hadn't finished. Light it again! I've got to finish this drawing. Light it, I tell you!"

"Can't be done. That's the only bit of candle left. Old Frenchy don't know when he can get us any more."

In the darkness they heard O'Donovan stand up, heard his shoes shuffling towards them.

"Where are you? Give me those matches!"

"Take it easy now, kid."

"Half-balmy, that's what he is," said Binfield.

"Who said that? I'll teach you. I'm as sane as either of you. What do you know about what goes on in my mind? Give me those matches! I've got to finish my drawing."

"It's only the same one you've made already, over and over again."

"You fool! You bloody ignorant lout! How would you know the difference between one drawing and another? I'm seeking perfection, I tell you. Yes, and I'm getting near it. I was, anyhow, till you put the candle out. Give me those matches!"

O'Donovan was blundering past them when Chester Park, whose eyes had recovered quickest from the unaccustomed candlelight and could now discern and locate shapes in the stone-enclosed darkness, reached up and caught him round the knees, bringing him down. The next moment the American had a firm clasp round the boy's arms, binding them to his side.

"Take it easy, kid. You're better down here, along with us. You might go over the edge if you walk about. You might fall in the drink."

"That'd be a good thing for all of us. Let me go!"

"Quiet, now."

"Let me go!"

O'Donovan, shouting at the top of his voice, never ceased to struggle to get his arms free. He tried to butt Chester Park with his head, and, twisting his body, to kick with knees and feet.

Arthur Binfield, sitting the other side of the American, said fatalistically: "Better give him a crack over the head. Knock him out for a bit. He may be all right again when he comes round."

"Bloody fine pals you are! If I get a hand free——"

Quite suddenly his struggles stopped. He shuddered from head to foot, and then said, almost naturally: "It's all right now, America. You can let me go." Even when the grip on his arms

relaxed only a little, his voice was still calm and patient. "It's O.K. I'm not foxing."

The abruptly-lowered tension made them all feel strange. They became shy with each other. After a moment, O'Donovan said: "I'm sorry about that. Don't know what came over me."

"I wish I could do it myself," Arthur Binfield expressed. "Sometimes I feel I'd like to see how loud I could scream."

"Aw, this place'd get on anybody's nerves."

But O'Donovan was taking no ready consolations. Chester Park noticed that his voice, though no longer hysterical or shrill with anger, was not natural after all. It produced words in inert successions, without relish, almost without intonation.

"I made an exhibition of myself just now. If apologising would do any good, I'd apologise. Do you know why I can't stand being here? It's because I'm learning what I'm really like. Most of the time, before we got into this hole, I used to play-act. I see myself as a blasted hero in a play, and I'm the audience, too. And I take good care the audience never stops applauding. I kid myself I can do things better than other people: paint pictures, make love, be a good soldier, full of guts and initiative. But here I've had to face the truth. Why? Because there's nothing else to look at in this god-forsaken darkness. Nothing to look at except the truth in my own heart, the truth I've been running away from all my life. I'm a rotten failure. Why are we here? Because I tried to be clever at the cross-roads and then made a mess of everything by leading away in the wrong direction. You haven't said a word, but I know what you've been thinking in your hearts. You're thinking it's my fault we're living like beasts in this cave. And you're quite right."

"We don't think nothing of the sort."

"Then you ought to. And don't interrupt. For once in my life I've achieved honesty. Anything I've done that seems good—it was only play-acting. The truth is, I'm a failure. Do you know why I got that paper from Dumesnil? Why I keep on sketching, sketching, sketching? I was kidding myself, if I'd failed as a soldier, I could still justify my existence because I was an artist. I said to myself: make one good drawing, one drawing you can look at and say, without deceiving yourself, 'That's perfect.'

And I couldn't do it! Each time I hoped—no, more than hoped. I was confident. Cocksure! It's like me to be cocksure. I'd be more bearable if I wasn't cocksure. Each time I felt I was going to make a drawing which I'd know in my heart—that's where you can't be deceived, in your heart!—was just right, not a line wrong, not a line omitted that ought to be there, not a line too many, nothing blurred, nothing over-emphasized."

"But you couldn't expect to, with a bit of pencil and writing-paper, and only the light of a candle! Besides, they're real good, those drawings."

O'Donovan tossed the objection aside.

"I wasn't trying to draw for a show, or to satisfy any one else. Only myself. I knew what I had to do—it's here, inside me. But I couldn't. I simply haven't the skill. I'm a failure at that too. Each time, when I finished, before I finished, I knew there was something wrong. Each time it was something different that went wrong. And each time I told myself: the next one, I'll get it right. But I never did. And I never shall."

"I'll tell you what you want," said Chester Park.

"What's that?"

"Daylight. And fresh air. So do we all. Fellows, we been here long enough."

"You're right there," said Arthur Binfield.

"Old Frenchy's due to-morrow night. We'll stick it out till then. That's only fair. Then we'll tackle him. And whatever he says, we're not staying here. We'll get a boat somehow. Maybe we'll have to fight for it. Maybe we'll be seen and sunk. Better that than staying here any longer. What say?"

"I'll follow you anywhere. That's all I can promise. I'm a failure."

It was difficult, thought Chester Park, to recognise O'Donovan for the same kid who had fought a way down the Avenue at Le Bandelot and trapped a German column between two blazing trucks. Maybe he'd lost his nerve? Maybe he'd never be any good for soldiering again, after the long wait in this cave? It happened like that to some guys, good guys who just went to pieces suddenly. But it was a damn shame if it had to be O'Donovan.

Out of Camp

THE reception camp to which Carol Blanchard was conducted, as one of a number of A.T.S. recruits known collectively as an "intake," lay within easy reach of Ascot. This displeased her. She had hoped to make a clean break in her life and now she knew she would be expected to visit her mother at the first opportunity. Nevertheless, she was surprised when, one afternoon, before she had been in the camp a week, a young corporal with a brisk, efficient manner announced: "Your mother's waiting to see you."

"Where?"

"Headquarters office. I've come to take you there."

"Oh, blast!"

"Don't you want to see her?" the corporal asked, as they left the barrack hut.

"Not particularly. Not just now. Not till I've settled down here and got the hang of things."

The corporal seemed to understand. Carol liked her, and liked her all the more because, though her voice was as English as Emmet's, she had an Irish name—O'Riordan—and soft dark hair, dark brows and lashes, and blue eyes like Emmet's. She was not so tall as Emmet, but she walked with a vigorous stride, shoulders erect, arms swinging, chin tilted. Already Carol had learned to admire this demeanour as soldierly and now she tried, as they made their way along the paths between huts and stores and gravelled open spaces, to show how well she herself could march.

"Don't forget you're on parade," the corporal whispered. "I've got to halt you outside. And when you go in, pay no atten-

tion to your mother. Stand to attention and salute the commandant. Keep your eyes on her, till she gives you the Stand Easy."

"I'll try not to let you down."

"O.K. We don't expect too much from rookies, but do your best. And don't forget to salute and about-turn when you come out."

At the headquarters hut the corporal knocked on the door, waited a moment, then pushed it open and entered. Carol heard her say in what seemed an unnecessarily loud voice: "Private Blanchard, ma'am. You sent for her."

She took her cue, marched in, and, without a side glance at her mother, halted fairly steadily in front of the desk, though her right heel did not clatter down quite close enough to the left. Corporal O'Riordan's deliberately blank face—it was a charming face, really—revealed in a sharpening of the eyes, a momentary wryness of the young lips, something less than complete approval. As if to demonstrate how military ceremonial ought to be performed, the corporal saluted with smart precision, turned about, and marched vigorously out of the hut.

"Stand easy, Blanchard," the commandant told Carol. "I sent for you at your mother's request. It's quite irregular, of course, but as your brother is in the Service and his leaves cannot be expected to coincide with yours, I am making an exception this time. You will be off duty now, till this evening. Here is a pass, but you understand you must not go farther than the town?"

"Very good, ma'am."

So David had come too. It was only now that Carol permitted herself to glance at him, standing tall and elegant in his old cavalry undress uniform, blue with silver epaulettes and a tight collar. She guessed that it was he, rather than her mother, who had impressed the commandant. A regular officer, cavalry, and now in the Commandos, young and decidedly handsome: he was made to burst a passage through the restrictions of even a women's military service. She managed her salute better the second time, and then had to wait outside while her mother and her brother completed less stiff and subordinate farewells.

As soon as they emerged, a hopeful explanation of their visit darted, hot, eager, illuminating, into her mind.

"What is it?" she asked. "Have you any news?"

"What news?" her brother asked.

"About Emmet."

"O'Donovan? No. We've heard nothing."

"You would hear, wouldn't you, at the Commando?"

"Yes, we'd get an official notification if the Germans reported him as a prisoner of war or dead. It would come through Geneva, the International Red Cross."

"What about the radio? Some of the girls say the Germans often read out the names of British prisoners, with messages to relatives and friends."

"They do. It's one of their ways of trying to get people to listen."

"And if his name was broadcast like that, you'd know about it?"

"Yes. But we haven't heard a word."

She could see that her mother hated all these questions. As soon as she had shown her pass at the guard-room and they were out of the camp, her mother sighed: "Well, it's a relief to be out of that place. A most unsuitable environment for young girls! And that woman at the desk. I don't know how I managed to keep my temper when she called you Blanchard. You might have been a housemaid."

"We've got a couple of housemaids in my hut. They're rather decent."

Her mother ignored that. "A very nasty woman indeed, if you ask me. Domineering! The humiliation of having to ask favours of her!"

"You got your way, anyhow."

"I must say," exclaimed David, anxious to prevent an open disagreement, "it all seemed very regimental to me."

"And why not?" Carol demanded. She remembered the precepts drilled into her by the male sergeant-major, and earnestly repeated and embellished, after parades, by Corporal O'Riordan. "The Ats are part of the army. That's laid down. The more soldierly we are, the better. You ought to understand that, David."

"If you ask me," her mother said, "it's all a lot of nonsense."

You're not soldiers and you can't be soldiers. You're just girls. I do hope, Carol, this life won't coarsen you."

"It may harden me. And that won't do me any harm. Besides, it's the same for every one."

"But a lot of these girls are common. Goodness only knows what sort of homes they come from."

"Most of them are nice. I like them."

"That's right," said David. "Stick up for your own unit. Nothing like the regimental spirit." He grinned as he said that. He was not taking her seriously. Not so long ago she had refused in her heart to take men's soldiering seriously.

"It's a long way into the town," her mother complained. "We got a taxi out to the camp. At least, it was supposed to be a taxi. But the man wouldn't wait to take us back. Are you sure this is the right way, Carol?"

"No, I'm not. This is the first day I've been out of camp."

"Why, darling, have you been unhappy? Have you been homesick?"

"No. But the rule is, recruits don't leave camp for the first fortnight. The others will be mad with me, when they hear about this."

"You might just as well be in prison!"

"We haven't far to go now," David encouraged his mother. "Just round this corner and then we can see the High Street."

"I do hope there's a decent teashop. I'm very tired, and very worried about you, Carol. I still can't understand why you couldn't have stayed where you were in London. You were doing useful war work, and you were with nice people, and you were well looked after."

"Too well looked after."

"You don't mean to say you like it here?"

"But I do. I shall be glad when the training's over, though. Then I'm to be posted to a battery."

"Ack-ack?"

"What does that mean, David? I get so mixed up with all these war words."

Carol explained. "Anti-aircraft."

"Gracious, you're not going to fire a gun?"

"They won't let us. We only work the predictors and range-finders. They're the things that locate the enemy aircraft before the gunsights and the fuses are set."

"But that's awfully dangerous!"

"It might be sometimes."

"Oh, dear, I shall sleep worse than ever now."

In the little café, seated at a table in the window, Mrs. Blanchard was irritated because the waitress said she could have only Indian tea.

"We can still get China tea at Ascot! It's absurd! Every one makes the war an excuse for not providing what they ought to provide. Carol, have you applied for a commission yet? You remember, I advised you to put your name down at once."

"No, I haven't."

"Whyever not?"

"Because I don't know yet whether I'm going to be efficient in the ranks. If I make a success of that, and if they think I'm good enough, no doubt they'll recommend me. There's no hurry."

David put in a word then. "You ought to apply for a commission, you know. These democratic ideas—they're all right in principle. But they don't alter the fact that a certain type makes a good officer, and others don't."

"You mean, I was born into the right class?"

"Yes. It's a kind of obligation laid on us, to take authority."

"Oh, Carol, you haven't congratulated David yet on his promotion."

She glanced at her brother's uniform. A crown and a star! At the Manor House she had guessed it was coming.

"Good heavens! You're a lieutenant-colonel!"

"Only acting rank, of course."

"Are you in command now?"

"Yes, until the old O.C. comes back. *If* he comes back. He was pretty badly wounded at Le Bandelot."

Le Bandelot! The newspapers had burned the name into her heart. Le Bandelot was where Emmet had been seen for the last time, unhurt then, thank God, with two other men. They were all listed among the missing. The same raid had elevated her brother two steps in his profession, and given him, before he was thirty, an independent command.

"I'm very glad," she said. "I'm sure you'll be an efficient colonel. Sorry you've only a private for a sister."

"You're not really sorry, are you?"

"Not a bit."

"Well," Mrs. Blanchard exclaimed, "the tea is at least hot, even though it has such an abominable taste. And these scones are quite eatable. For war-time."

Carol turned to her brother again. "Do you think he's still alive?"

"It's impossible to say, old girl. You can't imagine how fast things move on a night raid, how confused everything gets. You can't see any one clearly, you know."

"But he might be alive?"

"Of course he might. Only——"

"Only what?"

"There were three of them. I saw them at the cross-roads, the cross-roads nearest the sea, the one we called Oxford Circus. We'd done the job then and were pulling back to the coast. They had no business to be there. I ordered them to hurry back to the cliffs as fast as they could. And, of course, I assumed they would obey the order at once."

"Why did you leave them?"

"I had my own duty to do. I had to scout along the road to make sure no one else was left behind. There was a wounded sergeant with them. O'Donovan put him into a truck and told off another man to drive him. Those two got back all right. And I can't understand why the other three didn't."

"You think they were captured?"

"Or killed."

"I see."

David was speaking quite gently. He understood her no better than her mother did. He was puzzled. But he did not try to hurt her. That was because she was a woman, and he believed women were weak, vulnerable, entitled to indulgence.

"I've got to say this," he went on. "I only know O'Donovan as a trooper under my command. That's the only way I'm concerned with him. My experience is that he was adequate in

training and—what shall I say, brave and enterprising in action. But he was very young, and very headstrong. Initiative is all right up to a point. But O'Donovan seemed at times to think he was an officer. Not even a junior officer either. In fact, he was quite a bit above himself during that raid. I had to speak to him about it."

"You couldn't forgive him, could you? Because he loved me. Because I loved him."

"That had nothing to do with it. Every soldier needs courage. O'Donovan had plenty. What he lacked was discipline."

"Why do you say 'was'? Was! Was! Do you think he's dead? Do you know he's dead? Are you trying to hide it from me?"

Her mother was alarmed. "Carol, you must moderate your voice. People will hear what you're saying."

"Let them. David—is he dead?"

"I've told you. I don't know."

"But you think he is?"

"All I can say is this. If he'd been captured, I believe we should have heard by now. And because he was so headstrong I'm afraid he may have—well, run into trouble after I left him."

"You shouldn't have left him. If you loved me, if you even liked me, you wouldn't have left him."

"Oh, dear! Why did we come to this place? I hate scenes in public."

"There isn't going to be any scene," she assured her mother. "Look! Do I show any sign of tears? Am I hysterical?"

To herself she thought: I'll go straight back. Pass or no pass, I don't want to stay out. The sooner I'm back in camp with things to do and people to talk to, the better. But most of the other girls would be talking about their boys, their safe, sound, unharmed, unheadstrong boys. Damn them!

David was speaking again. "Sorry, old girl. But you asked me and I had to give you a straight answer."

They both wanted Emmet to be dead!

The next moment her mother was saying as much, in her own rambling, indirect way.

"Now, dear, surely the best thing you can do is to forget. It's

all been very unfortunate, but after all, no one knows. Except the Scopes, of course. And I'm sure we can rely on their discretion. Time is a wonderful healer. By Christmas—before then, perhaps—you'll have forgotten that all this ever happened. Every one will have forgotten. I promise you, it shall never be mentioned again."

"We all make mistakes, sometimes," said David.

"And don't have hard thoughts about your mother, dear. From first to last I've only been thinking of your best interests. You'll be surprised how quickly this will pass away. You're still very young. There's plenty of time in front of you. You'll meet other young men, nice young men. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned that now? I didn't mean any harm. I dare say this boy had his good points. Heaven knows, I'm not a snob. But it would never have done, my dear. You'd only have been unhappy. So perhaps it's all for the best, after all, the way things have turned out."

They wanted Emmet to be dead!

"But he's alive!" she cried. "Even if the Germans have killed him, I keep him alive. Here, in my heart. He's more alive than you'll ever be, either of you. You belong to the past, but he's alive, now and in the future. You don't understand that. You don't even understand what we're fighting this war for. You haven't noticed the world changing around you. You haven't noticed me changing. You don't know what I'm like, inside. Emmet does. He knew at once. That's why I love him."

She turned away, suddenly conscious that all the people in the café were staring at her. It did not matter. Nothing mattered. She felt weak as she hurried to the door, but once in the street, she began to run. She ran along the crowded pavements, blinded with tears. She heard David call after her, twice. But he would not follow: it would be undignified for a lieutenant-colonel in undress uniform to run after a silly girl in the A.T.S. who tore through the crowds with tears streaming down her swollen face and a heavy respirator banging at her hip. Corporal O'Riordan, who had instructed her always to walk smart and erect in the presence of civilians, would not approve either. Corporal

O'Riordan was a dear, and after to-day she would try to please her. After to-day she would be a soldier, but for the present she could only be a woman, a woman unable to stop running, unable to restrain her tears, a woman who did not know whether her lover was alive or dead.

CHAPTER 25

The Sandbank

THEY had waited with what seemed to them preternatural patience for this moment, and now that it had come it brought disaster and frustration. Squatting and lying behind the boulder which blocked the upper exit from the cave, near the top of the headland, they heard Dumesnil approaching. His slow, unhurried walk was familiar to them all by now. He always came like that, because most of the way—he had told them about this often—he was under observation by German sentries. If the moon were up, he dare not stop at all, merely dropping the paper-padded packet of food beside the boulder. On a darker night he could take the risk of halting for a few minutes to whisper to them. This night, the one night that mattered, there were only stars to illuminate the sky, as they could see when they took turns to peer through a chink near the top of the exit. They prepared to put their shoulders to the great stone and heave it a foot or so aside, enough to give passage to a man. It was so balanced that it could be moved so far and no farther. They intended to draw the old Frenchman inside, through the narrow opening, tell him they were determined to leave immediately, and give him enough time to get clear away before they began their venture.

He could not have been more than thirty or forty yards away when they heard the peremptory challenge ring out. Then another voice speaking German, and another which O'Donovan knew was speaking French with a German accent. Dumesnil was answering. He had been stopped by a mobile patrol!

They had the submachine-gun and the two rifles with them, loaded. In the darkness they could not see each other.

"Give a hand," O'Donovan whispered, thrusting against the boulder.

"Ay, we can't let the old chap get snaffled, all along o' helping us."

But Chester Park would not agree.

"Keep quiet. I'll tell you why after."

Listening intently, they heard the sound of heavy boots, several pairs, going away from them.

"They've arrested Dumesnil," O'Donovan said angrily.

"Come back to the cave," said Chester Park.

They stumbled down the long incline after him. When they were back on the rock shelf, he took the candle stump out of his pocket and lighted it.

"Now, listen," he said. "We've got to get this straight. A Jerry patrol has picked up old Frenchy."

"And we let them!"

"What good would it have done to go out and fight? Like as not we'd have put a bullet in him, in the mix-up. We'd have made such a row that every Jerry for miles round would hear. We'd have been bumped off or captured, ourselves."

"Maybe. That'd be better than standing by and letting 'em march old Frenchy off. Now they'll shoot him and come here and dig us out."

"No, they won't. He's only being held for interrogation. He'll have his papers in order. He must have been passed by one sentry. Probably the patrol's new to this district. They may have changed the garrison."

"What about the food he was bringing us?"

"He'll say it was for himself. He can prove he has a permit to come this way every third night, to look at his lobster pots. He supplies the officers' mess with lobsters. Isn't that what he told you, O'Donovan?"

"Yes. I dare say you were right. Dumesnil will be O.K.—unless Jerry gets suspicious and starts investigating. If they find this cave, they'll soon connect him with it. And what are we going to do now? Stay here and starve?"

The American pointed down below the rock shelf to where,

hidden in darkness, the seawater was faintly slapping and hissing below them in the lower part of the cave.

"I calculate in forty minutes from now it'll be low tide. We can all swim. We' can't get out up there, by the boulder. Not now. But this way—well, there's nothing else for us to do."

What awaited them once they had swum out through the narrow sea exit, and what prospect they had of escaping capture, they could not foresee. But the thought of leaving the cave was in itself an invigoration. Arthur Binfield began to whistle. Chester Park said: "We'll blow out the candle now, and light it again ten minutes before we quit. It'll just about last us out, that way."

O'Donovan had an idea and began to expound it eagerly. "Before we go, we ought to clean up the place thoroughly. Anything we can't take with us we must sink. We mustn't leave a scrap of food or paper or candle grease either. Then if Jerry finds the cave to-morrow, there'll be nothing to show we were ever here. That'll help Dumesnil."

"Ay. Jerry'll think he's been imagining things."

"We'll have to swim out with all we've got on. Might take shoes and socks off, but we mustn't leave 'em here."

They waited till the phosphorescent fingers of O'Donovan's watch showed that half an hour had passed. Then by candlelight they scoured the rock shelf to remove all traces of their occupation, bundling the scraps into parcels which they weighted with stones and tied with string. Some of the paper they used was discarded wrappings from the food parcels Dumesnil had brought them: the rest was made up from the sheets O'Donovan had covered with his pencil sketches. He screwed them up and folded them round stones and cigarette ends and fish bones without sparing a glance for the drawings over which he had agonised.

"We can't sink them here," O'Donovan decided. "Jerry might drag the cave. We'll carry 'em out with us and let 'em go in deep water."

"I always said you got brains, kid."

But it was Chester Park who had saved them from a futile foray.

The rifles and the Sten-gun they determined to carry slung over their shoulders, muzzles forward; they might then be fit to fire when the swim ended. They removed the ammunition pouches from their equipment and stowed them into their woollen caps, so that they all had high crowns. One of the pouches contained two hand grenades, and another their remaining matches.

"No fancy swimming now. Breast stroke all the way."

Chester Park was the first to see the flaw in these arrangements.

"Hell! How are we going to get down there to the water? We can't dive or we'll get all our weapons wet."

"Besides, we don't know how deep the water is."

While the other two stood, perplexed and angry, O'Donovan walked a few feet apart, selected a spot where the rock edge was level and sharply angled, and without a word lowered himself suddenly over the side, turning to take a double hand-grip. Park and Binfield could see only the knuckles of his hands, glistening white in the candlelight, and the high crown of his woollen cap, not so clearly illuminated, as at arm's length he looked downwards.

"Can't see a thing!" he called. "I'll have to take a chance."

Before they could protest, he let go with his hands, at the same time thrusting slightly outwards. Out of the pitchy darkness below them the other two men heard a hollow and echoing splash; then smaller watery noises; and then a laugh.

"I dropped lucky," O'Donovan called up. "There's a bit of a ledge here, under water. Enough for us all to stand on, if we're careful. I've tried beyond that with one foot, and can't find the bottom. No wading this trip. Swimmers only."

The boy, Chester Park decided, was enjoying himself. His moods swung this way and that, violently. He was scarcely recognisable as the same O'Donovan who had cursed and kicked and shouted because a candle was extinguished before he wished it, and afterwards had lain inert in the darkness and bemoaned despairingly his inability to draw a girl's head to his own satisfaction. He was queer. He was two people, not one.

The American was not sure he could understand both the personalities who went by the name of Emmet O'Donovan.

They unbuckled one set of equipment, and tying it together again into a rough rope, used it to lower to O'Donovan the rifles and the submachine-gun, which he unfastened and held clear of the water. Next, Arthur Binfield dropped down beside him, and received the ammunition pouches, lowered very carefully because the lighted candle had been stuck on one pouch. Chester Park had then to find the edge of the rock in complete darkness, but he could drop into light.

They were standing now up to their thighs in water, at the foot of the rock which terminated, above their heads, beyond sight, in the narrow shelf near the top of the cave, the shelf where they had lived for five weeks. If they moved more than a few inches they would fall into deep water, and it was a cramped and difficult task to sling their weapons and fasten the improvised ammunition packs on their heads. They had to take turns and help each other.

At last they were ready. Arthur Binfield was to go first; he carried the candle—there was less than half an inch of it—on the empty ammunition pouch bound to the top of his head. He was the strongest and steadiest swimmer, and with the help of that small flickering illumination he would swim ahead to find the exit from the cave.

"Don't forget, Arthur. Douse the glim as soon as you see the way out."

They set off with a slow breast stroke, Park and O'Donovan anxiously following the tiny bobbing flame of the candle, which dimly lighted the water for a few feet around: all else was darkness. Their necks ached as they strove to keep the precious ammunition dry. The water was cold but it flowed in the direction they were going, proof at least that the tide was on the ebb. The cave must have been longer than they had imagined: moment after moment went by and still they were swimming in darkness, and in all their hearts fear expanded: fear that they were trapped between rock and water, deep in the earth, and before they could find the exit to the harbour the candle would burn itself out and leave them to drown, blind and helpless.

Then Arthur Binfield whispered back: "Here we are. Can you chaps see the place?"

They answered "Yes" because they were longing to be out of the cave, but it was not for a few moments after he had thrown a handful of water over the candle to extinguish it that they saw ahead of them a faint glimmer in a boundless frame of black. The narrow orifice was level at the surface of the water, roughly arched for a few inches above. Park trod water, insisting that O'Donovan go first. The boy had to drop his face, mouth, nose, eyes and even ears, under water to get a clearance for his packed woollen cap as he swam through.

Outside there were stars overhead: millions of them, scattered wide and high. The whole world of the night seemed vast, and the air they drew into their lungs an essence of freedom. Treading water, they let go the weighted bundles of paper and scraps of food. Now they could see the side of the headland rising above them, steep, a cliff-face. It might be possible to land and find a climbing route to the top: but up there, they knew, the Germans kept permanent guards, and the patrol which had arrested Dumesnil might be roving again. From water level they could distinguish one or two scattered and dimmed lights to the left, where the harbour and the town of St. Armand must lie. The lights seemed far off.

Chester Park pointed ahead to where, not more than a hundred yards away perhaps, a long low stretch of land was faintly visible, unlighted, little more than a shadow above the water and below the lowest of the stars. They agreed silently and followed him, swimming as quietly as possible: if their heads were seen, here in the entrance to a German-occupied harbour, they would certainly be fired on.

For the first few yards the tide swept them to the right, seawards; then it seemed to slacken. Nevertheless the last part of the short swim taxed all their remaining endurance. Breath came painfully hard, and their muscles seemed ready at any moment to yield to the more powerful water. When they touched bottom at last, and waded ashore in their heavy, water-logged clothes, they were glad to fall full-length on the warm wet sand. Their strength was exhausted. It was some time

before they could speak. The pause enabled them to remember the essential cautions. They crawled close together, lying flat on the sand, and breathed words gently into each other's ears.

"Weak as a kitten, I am."

"Me too."

"All that time in the cave. It's taken the guts out of us."

"What shall we do now?"

"Better look at the rifles. The breeches'll need drying out."

They snapped open the butt traps and took out pieces of flannel and the oil bottles, all fortunately dry. With these they sopped out the little seawater that had reached the mechanism of the rifles and the Sten-gun: then they took off their caps, charged the magazines, and put the spare ammunition into their pockets. The pouches they buried in the sand.

"God, I could do with a square meal. Half-starved we are. How about a tenderloin steak, eh?"

"Don't talk about it. What do we do now?"

"Better see where this leads to."

The wet sand rose in a gradual slope in front of them. They crawled cautiously forward, only to find that more sand lay beyond the ridge. They went on again. More wet sand.

"We're a prize lot of fools," exclaimed O'Donovan suddenly. "This is a sandbank! That's all. Nothing but a blasted sandbank. It's probably covered at high tide."

He was right: pushing on in the same direction they came to water again.

"This is my fault," said Chester Park. "I headed us here. I should have left it to you, kid. You got the brains."

"I'd have done just the same. What else could we have done?"

"Ay. And what can we do now?"

"Well, there's land over there. Where the lights are."

"How far is it?"

They knew at once that in their exhausted, undernourished condition they would not be able to swim half so far, even if they removed their uniforms.

"Maybe we'll feel better in a bit."

"Maybe."

"If we had something to eat, it'd be different."

"Well, we haven't got anything to eat."

The only alternatives were to set off and drown before they reached the shore or wait till daylight and then ignominiously surrender. And before dawn, for all they knew, the rising tide might submerge the sandbank.

"I still don't see what else we could have done," said O'Donovan. "We had to get out of that cave. For Dumesnil's sake, as well as our own. Once we were out of the cave, this was the only logical place to swim to."

"We ought to have climbed up that cliff. We'd have had a scrap then, before we got done in."

"But we couldn't know that at the time. I'll tell you what. Let's rest here a bit and then swim back the way we came."

"What, back to the cave?" Arthur Binfield asked.

"No. See if we can climb the cliff."

"We'll be dead beat by the time we get there. Still, we might try."

After half an hour, though they felt no stronger, their minds were restless for action. O'Donovan suggested they should explore the whole of the sandbank before they left it for the desperate swim.

"After all, we're not dead sure it is a sandbank."

"If it's not, I'm a Dutchman."

"Let's cut across there, anyhow. I'd like to have a look out to sea before I become a casualty or a prisoner of war."

"You won't see much on a night like this."

They grumbled but they went with him, ploughing their feet deep into the soft sand hummocks and sometimes walking through shallow pools of water. When they were within a few yards of the water's edge, Arthur Binfield put out his hand and stopped them. "Listen!" he whispered.

They halted, crouching very still in the darkness, sharpening their sight and hearing.

Binfield drew their heads close to him. "That's a boat."

"Where?"

He pointed.

"Can't see anything."

"Not yet. But I can hear it. Oars. Not far away."

A boat! If they could capture a boat and get it out of the harbour entrance into the Channel, a British plane might observe them in the morning: speedboats might dash out from the English coast to their rescue. Anything might happen if they could lay hands on a boat!

"It won't come near here," O'Donovan whispered.

"I don't know. Why are they being so quiet with the oars?"

Suddenly they all saw the boat run gently up on to the sand, in front of them, quite close, a few yards away to the right. A man, the ill-defined shape of a man, leaped out over the bow. Then two more.

The watchers dropped softly to the ground behind a ridge of sand, pushing their weapons out in front of them. But if they fired, the alarm would be raised, and they would have no chance of getting away. Besides, the men in the boat might be French.

Binfield and O'Donovan shuddered as the American beside them raised his voice. He did not shout, but he spoke plainly and clearly. He was not speaking to his two comrades. He was challenging the man beside the boat.

"Halt! Who are you?"

Only the boat could be seen now, squat, broad-beamed. The men had disappeared from view. But one of them answered. He answered in English!—"Tell us who you are yourselves."

"You've been challenged," Chester Park called back. "Answer properly. We've got you covered."

Silence!

Then from beside the boat the voice answered: We're the Royal Navy, my lads, and you'd better not try any funny business."

"The Navy!" All three of them repeated the words.

The man hidden at the water's edge—he was probably lying in or beside the boat—went on, angrily, suspiciously, but still not raising his voice: "I said the Navy. Now, who the hell are you?"

"Commando men."

"It would be," the sailor exclaimed. "You bloody chaps don't know the meaning of discipline. You got no right to be here. Not yet. How did you get here, anyway?"

O'Donovan, Park and Binfield stared at each other, mystified.

Suddenly they rose to their feet and walked forward. They found four seamen and a petty officer who did not lower their rifles and heavy revolvers even when they could plainly make out the commando men's uniforms. They all talked at cross-purposes for some minutes till O'Donovan began to tell about their long confinement in the cave.

"Here," said the petty officer, "you're not in our bloody Commando at all."

"What do you mean, *your* Commando?"

"What's your unit? What are you doing here? You'll have a lot of explaining to do, my lad."

O'Donovan gave the number of his Commando, and added that the three of them had been cut off during the raid on Le Bandelot.

"But that was weeks ago."

"You'd know how long it was," said Arthur Binfield, "if you'd been stuck in a cave like us."

The look-out cautioned them as another boat came up to the sandbank, a larger boat, with a naval officer aboard. He listened for a moment to O'Donovan's story, and then gave orders for them to be taken back on the next journey. They gathered that another Combined Operations raid was due to begin at any moment, and suggested they might be allowed to take part. The officer brushed this aside: "You wouldn't know what to do or where to go. The sooner we get you on board the better for every one. You're only in the way here."

Hungry, weary and weak as they were, they resented the words but were glad of their purport.

On the destroyer, Arthur Binfield exclaimed, between spoonfuls of hot soup: "You know, America, you put the fear of God into me, on that sandbank, when you upped with a challenge all of a sudden."

O'Donovan turned to Park as well. "I've been thinking about that, too. You fairly took a chance. How did you know they weren't Jerries?"

"Brother, I was so scared I almost dug myself into the sand. I went down a lot flatter'n either of you. I suppose that's why

I could just make out the shape of their tin hats against the stars."

There was a clatter between decks. Seamen began to hurry up the companionway, and inquisitively the three commando men followed. On the open deck they saw starshells and tracers and coloured searchlights lighting up the port a mile or more away.

"The boys have landed."

"Ay, they're in for it now."

"Here's wishing 'em luck."

It was strange to be watching a raid from this distance, comfortable, secure, remote, on the foredeck of a destroyer moving at half-speed offshore. They felt like gladiators unexpectedly exempted from the arena and taken up into the seats reserved for privileged spectators. They had felt like that on the snow-covered hillside at Torgsdal: secretly glad, secretly ashamed. But many things had happened since Torgsdal.

Two Telephones

SITTING at the bare wooden table in the hut marked "Press," Alexander Brind looked through his notes while he waited impatiently for the telephone call to his London office to come through. He wondered how he had come to take up these reporting assignments. "Assignment" was a pretentious word, imported from America and spreading through Fleet Street; a word he disliked. At his age, and with his record and standing, it was perhaps undignified to scurry away here and there by train or car, and telephone back hurriedly-composed and roughly-finished accounts of "red hot news." Special articles and occasional leaders on subjects he had studied thoroughly, work that could be written slowly, verified, polished, that was his rightful line. The editor himself was amazed, and not altogether approving, when he discovered that Alexander Brind was always eager to dash off to the coast as soon as the War Office issued one of its guarded intimations of what might very well prove to be a Commando raid.

Brind himself now concluded that he was impelled to these expeditions because the submerged romantic in him, still untutored by the passage of years, demanded adventures at least by proxy. And, of course, because, quite by chance, a childless widower, he had drifted into a paternal relationship with a boy in the Commandos and the girl the boy loved: both of them, in their different ways, romantics. More excuse for them than for a sixty-year-old! He was conscious of profound satisfaction, a pleasure pervading him wholly, body, soul and spirit, because of what had happened this day, and because it had happened here on the guarded jetty of this little southern English port. His

romanticism rejoiced not only on the safe return of Emmet O'Donovan, against all expectation—a great deal that happened in this tear-away war went against expectation—but in the circumstances of the boy's return. Here on the same jetty where an old fond man had searched in vain for one who was missing from among so many returning raiders, he had seen again the boy's unlooked-for face amid a crowd of others belonging to quite a different Commando. That satisfied his romanticism. His spirit fed on it.

It pleased him also to be able to use in the boy's behalf a little of the power which falls to the elderly who have not failed in the world. Taking advantage of his newspaper's prestige and his own reputation, he had overridden the clamours of young reporters and agency men, and secured to himself first use of two telephones in this busy hut. He had put in one call to his own office in Fleet Street and another to the camp where Carol Blanchard was going through her recruit training. O'Donovan, of course, did not even know she had volunteered for the A.T.S. O'Donovan did not believe it would be possible to have her fetched from duty to the other end of a telephone wire. O'Donovan would have to learn the power of the Press. The boy was waiting by the door of the hut, a cup of tea in his hand, looking pale and tired—no wonder after what he had been through!—and sometimes hopeful, sometimes incredulous.

Glancing at the few notes he had made, on sheets torn from a small pad of paper clipped into a leather case, Alexander Brind decided he had the outline of the story clear in his mind. The paper would print the official version quite small on an inside page: his account would go on the front page. He would hardly be allowed to say more than was in the War Office story, but he could say it better. And he had a few paragraphs to add which no other paper would carry. He was soft-hearted about O'Donovan but just the same he had remembered to exact a promise from him: he begged his friends not to talk to any other newspaper man.

This St. Armand raid had been neatly planned and neatly carried out. No penetration inland was needed, so that the hazards were absent which made the Le Bandelot raid so

difficult, and in fact came near to aborting it. He had noted all the main points: the objective, half a dozen docks for U-boats, concreted over to make them proof against bombs from the air. The approach along the narrow channel close to the headland, an hour after low tide: a time when boats of any but the shallowest draught could not enter the harbour at all. Naval detachments seizing an outlying sandbank uncovered by the tide, to guard the flank of the channel leading to the inner harbour. Dinghies with muffled oars, as in Nelson's days. Then the commando men coming in quite silently, lying flat on light wooden rafts which drifted soundlessly with the tide, and so going ashore undetected to seize wharves and warehouses. Then a rush of more commando men in assault-craft—no longer any need for silence—and naval demolition parties in speedboats. All over in less than an hour. Four U-boats destroyed. Light casualties.

That was the raid: effective and heartening. The other papers would be able to print just as many facts as his own. But none of them would carry the romantic appendix that was, till to-morrow, his exclusive property: the story of three young men from another Commando who, cut off during a previous raid, had evaded capture, lived on fish and dry bread and water in an underground cave for five weeks, escaped once more when capture threatened them again, and made an unforeseen rendezvous with the Navy on a lonely sandbank. It was a story any journalist would commit crime to obtain. And he was free to tell it because the old Frenchman who had harboured the escaped commando men had chosen to come to England with the returning raiders. It was a good story, and none the worse for being romantic. It would show Fleet Street that Alexander Brind was by no means feeling his age, that, when he chose to leave his desk, he left it to good purpose.

The telephone on the table began to ring. He picked up the receiver, and confirmed the number he had asked for—the A.T.S. Camp. O'Donovan came into the hut. He motioned the boy to sit beside him.

"I'll make them fetch her," he said.

Impatiently, O'Donovan looked at the pad of white paper in

front of him. He picked up the pencil and tapped it on the table.

Alexander Brind spoke urgently into the telephone: "I want to talk to the commandant. No one else will do. This is a Press call. Put me through quickly, please."

O'Donovan was staring at him.

"It'll take a few minutes," he explained. "You mustn't be impatient."

The boy stopped playing with the pencil and began to draw something on the paper. Almost every one did that, waiting for a telephone call.

"Is that the commandant? My name is Brind—Alexander Brind."

He began to explain the situation as quickly and lucidly as he could, but picking his words carefully: he did not want any of the other journalists in the hut, writing, smoking, tapping typewriters, to learn too much.

"I know it's irregular. But you must realise this sort of thing doesn't happen every day. She won't even know he's alive, much less in England. Yes, they're engaged. I give you my word on that. He only came back to-day. You can read all about it yourself in my paper to-morrow. Yes, under my name. No, I can't tell you where I'm speaking from. It's a military secret. But how would I have got this call through, if I wasn't who I say I am? Thank you. Yes, as quickly as possible, please."

He turned towards O'Donovan, intending to give him a triumphant wink. But the boy's head was bent over the paper, his pencil working fast.

At that moment Brind heard the telephone behind his back, the one in the soundproof call-box, begin to ring. He had left the door ajar, the better to hear it.

"Here," he said to O'Donovan, holding out the receiver in his hand. "That's my own call. Hang on to this. They're fetching her now."

O'Donovan did not seem to understand. He was looking down, earnestly, triumphantly, at the drawing he had made.

"I can!" he exclaimed. "I can do it, after all."

Alexander Brind decided he was, after all, not so youthful as

he had imagined. He had been deceiving himself. He was too old to understand the ways of modern young men and women.

Only when he thrust the receiver forcibly into the boy's hand did O'Donovan appear to come back to outward reality. He listened, said "Hallo" twice, and then turned a puzzled face of disappointment towards the older man.

"There's no one here," he complained.

"Hold on. She'll come. They've gone to fetch her."

Dashing into the call-box, Brind spoke to his office in Fleet Street. "Give me the News Room. Hallo? Hallo? This is Brind. I've got the story. It's for the front page. Are you ready to take dictation?"

Through the glass panel of the call-box he saw that O'Donovan had begun to talk into the table telephone, his face radiant, transformed, all tiredness and bewilderment gone.

THE END

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